

Demonesses and Devotees: The Women of *Kankyo no tomo*

by

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandparents, Thomas Henry Lindeman and Joan Wright Lindeman.

## Introduction

Buddhist thought, practices, and communities make an appearance in most major arenas of premodern Japanese studies; consider, for example, themes of karma and impermanence in many *monogatari*, or the economic power wielded by temples through estates. As Osumi Kazuo matter-of-factly observed in the foreword to the seminal essay collection *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, “There is hardly a scholarly issue in Japanese historical studies that can be understood without taking into account its relationship with Buddhism.”<sup>1</sup> Until the last twenty years or so, however, Anglophone studies of Japanese religion have emphasized the writings and metaphysical musings of famous men, particularly those who have come to be regarded as the founders of major sects. This has obscured multiple aspects of premodern Japanese Buddhism, including practice as opposed to rhetoric or the religious engagement of lay people and non-elites. My interests concern one similarly obscured type of practitioner: women in the early medieval period.

The thirteenth century was a time of notable social and political change. While the recently established Kamakura *bakufu* was more concerned with the affairs of its own warriors than with overtaking the court, aristocrats still felt threatened by its existence and powers.<sup>2</sup> This anxiety fed into a nostalgia for the court’s past glory days. Religion was similarly a site of change, as were women’s roles therein.<sup>3</sup> Women were involved in Buddhist communities as

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<sup>1</sup> Osumi Kazuo, “Foreword,” trans. Barbara Ruch, in *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, ed. Barbara Ruch (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> For a similar assessment, see Erin L. Brightwell, *Reflecting the Past: Place, Language, and Principle in Japan’s Medieval Mirror Genre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2020), 84-85.

<sup>3</sup> Much has been said on the topic of the “New Buddhisms” of the Kamakura period, including Pure Land sects, the Nichiren 日蓮 sect, and the increasing prominence of various Zen schools. These were once credited with spreading Buddhism to the non-aristocratic classes and with opening up the possibility of salvation to women. Today, scholars generally agree that these “New Buddhisms” were not as influential in the Kamakura period as they would later become and point out that the men who “founded” them came from within established institutions. Even so, people like Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212) and Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1263) were attempting to address the anxieties of their age by building from existing Buddhist ideas.

nuns, lay practitioners, pilgrims and patrons. Questions such as whether women could achieve enlightenment or what it meant to be a good Buddhist woman were met with diverse answers at every level of Japanese society. Women were gaining increased access to full participation in the clergy and remained influential patrons but, as Sachiko Kawai demonstrated in her dissertation, often struggled to control and expand the estates that supported their roles as patrons.<sup>4</sup>

Views on women's salvation and involvement in the community were hardly uniform even among men. In her investigation of aristocratic involvement in Buddhism, Lori Meeks points out that many monks struggled to reconcile the views on women they found in doctrinal texts with the inferior status they held in relation to their elite female clients, who thought of them as employees.<sup>5</sup> Their interests would have been split between presenting themselves as keepers of knowledge and serving the many women who were their patrons, relatives, or both. Outside of the monastic community, Meeks also uncovers evidence that suggests that some male aristocrats believed salvation to be available to women without complication. The *Heike nōkyō* 平家納経 scroll commissioned by Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 (1118-1181) and thirty-one other men depicts the Dragon King's daughter's transformation from a female state directly into an enlightened one.<sup>6</sup> We thus have a climate in which the perceived status of and possibilities for women were hardly uncontested issues. The interests of noble patrons and monks exerted varying influences on religious works meant for lay consumption, such as the *setsuwa* 説話 (didactic tales) collection *Kankyō no tomo* 閑居友 (Companion in Solitude, 1222), which is the focus of this thesis.

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<sup>4</sup> Sachiko Kawai, "Power of the Purse: Estates and the Religio-Political Influence of Japanese Royal Women, 1100-1300," (PhD dissertation, University of Southern California, 2015), 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Lori Meeks, *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

### Women and Buddhism in Early Medieval Japan

As suggested above, much of the Anglophone scholarship on women in Japanese Buddhism to date has focused on the ways in which women were disparaged and devalued in relation to men. The assumed prevalence of theories such as the five hindrances that prevent women from achieving enlightenment or the idea that women had to be reborn as men in order to become buddhas has much to do with this tendency. Although he is far from alone, Nagata Mizu's chapter in the previously mentioned *Engendering Faith* is a prime example. Nagata seeks to trace the origins of the three obligations and five obstructions through India and China and uncover how they influenced Japanese Buddhism's negative outlook on women, especially the views of the Kamakura founders.<sup>7</sup> He concludes that "Japanese Buddhists embraced the three obligations and five obstructions doctrines without resistance...What is unfortunate for Japanese women is that they believed these doctrines were the direct teachings of the Buddha and thus were held in their thrall."<sup>8</sup> In other words, because of the influence of teachings that disparaged women among Japanese monks and priests, Japanese Buddhist women passively received said ideas and internalized their own inferiority without further discussion. While surveying teachings on women's salvation and general participation in the early medieval Buddhist community, Barbara Ambros generally agrees with an earlier assessment from Bernard Faure that Buddhism "contributed actively to women's loss of status" by stressing their spiritual inferiority even when trying to save them.<sup>9</sup> If we focus on sutras and the writings of the Kamakura period "founders,"

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<sup>7</sup> Nagata Mizu, "Transitions in Attitudes toward Women in the Buddhist Canon: The Three Obligations, the Five Obstructions, and the Eight Rules of Reverence," trans. Paul B. Watt, in *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, ed. Barbara Ruch (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), 279 and 293-294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara R. Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 67.



the picture that emerges of women's relationship with Buddhism in Japan is largely misogynistic.

Certain scholars have demonstrated that not *every* monk was convinced of women's inferiority and that not *every* woman believed herself lesser. This work is an important intervention, but occasionally risks treating individual figures as exceptional for their time who may not have been so. To my understanding, Ryūichi Abé describes Myōe 明恵 (1173-1232) and Eizon 英尊 (1201-1290) in such a way: two reforming monks who reevaluated femininity as positive due to its association with liberating insight and were therefore more invested than many of their predecessors in rebuilding the nuns' order and expanding women's options for salvation. Abé deeply interrogates and clarifies Myōe and Eizon's ideas, but the doctrine-oriented nature of the article obscures the fact that a devalued femininity may not have been the only available option to a woman seeking Buddhist salvation prior to their campaigns.<sup>10</sup>

As for the empowered woman, James C. Dobbins description of Shinran's 親鸞 (1173-1263) wife Eshinni 恵信尼 (1182-1268) may be one example. Her letters, he argues, show the realities of practiced religion rather than idealized religion.<sup>11</sup> For example, she did not seem to believe she needed to be reborn as a man in the Pure Land, but rather that she and her female relatives would be born there as women.<sup>12</sup> Dobbins even refers to her as a "powerful matriarch," due to her landholdings and power within the family.<sup>13</sup> In such work, we see a refutation of the idea that all Japanese women internalized their inability to become enlightened without question.

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<sup>10</sup> Ryūichi Abé, "Mantra, *Hinin*, and the Feminine: On the Salvational Strategies of Myoe and Eizon," *Cahiers d'Extreme Asie* 13 (2002), 117-119.

<sup>11</sup> James C. Dobbins, "Women's Birth in Pure Land as Women: Intimations from the Letters of Nun Eshinni," *The Eastern Buddhist* 28, no. 1 (1995): 113-115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-120.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

However, such figures may not have truly been so outside contemporary norms. Other scholars have suggested that women, especially among the elite, were perceived as having access to salvation. In *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan*, Brian Ruppert argues that many of the innovations previously attributed to Kamakura period “New Buddhism” were in fact already present in the Heian period worship of Buddha relics.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the salvation of women, Ruppert demonstrates that high-ranking court women saw the worship of relics, which descended from temple mountains that they could not visit, as a way to create crucial karmic bonds with the Buddha.<sup>15</sup> They also actively utilized connections between women, relic worship, and the manifestation of wish-granting jewels to “circumvent [...] the impurities attributed to their gender.”<sup>16</sup> Essentially, relic worship gave women a religious path of their own, and one that we would miss if we only look at doctrine.

Meeks has demonstrated that women’s salvation *in their female form* was perhaps more popular a theory among women and men of the Heian and early Kamakura court than might be expected.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned above, Meeks specifically points our attention to the twelfth scroll of the *Heike nōkyō*, which shows the Dragon King’s daughter becoming a Buddha without becoming a man first. Additionally, she tells us that rebirth in the Tusita Heaven *as a woman* was a popular goal and even advocated by monks as a good option for their female patrons.<sup>18</sup> This was true in spite of what was written in the sutras and commentaries that monks studied. Meeks speculates that it may explain why Hokkeji nuns were not as concerned with whether or not they, as women, could be saved as the Saidaiji monks they associated with may have been.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brian D. Ruppert, *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> Meeks, *Hokkeji*, 69-70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

We have now seen evidence of negative and positive views of women in premodern Japanese Buddhism; although I have highlighted positive possibilities, the monastic debate over women's salvation and doctrines like the five obstructions implies that the situation was complicated. However, my primary area of concern is not what monks said to one another in their temple halls, but how women may have seen themselves within the community and how that may have impacted the broader religious dialogue on women. If we are to push through the complications and investigate on what terms women participated in the Buddhist community, as Ruppert and Meeks have above, we must consider sources with which they would have interacted, including literary works with prominent Buddhist themes. Women were patrons and audiences of such works, as was the case with *Kankyo no tomo*. I contend that here we see the combined interests of an aristocratic woman and a male monk, and the resulting cautious positivity regarding women's place in Buddhism.

### ***Kankyo no tomo* and Women's Religious Education**

Generally attributed to the Tendai monk Keisei 慶政 (1189-1268), *Kankyo no tomo* was commissioned by a noblewoman (her exact identity is unknown) and served as an educational text for her and possibly general lay audiences.<sup>20</sup> The collection contains a total of 32 stories, with 21 in the first part and 11 in the second. Its most common themes include the realization of

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<sup>20</sup> In the introduction to his critical edition of the *Kankyo no tomo*, Minobe Shigekatsu tells us that some have hypothesized her identity to be Shikikenmon'in 式乾門院 (1197-1251) or Ankamon'in 安嘉門院 (1209-1283), but does not decisively agree with either of these ideas or present another one. He also informs us that Keisei is the son of the regent Kujō Yoshitsune 九条良経 (1169-1206). Minobe Shigekatsu, "Kaisetsu," in *Kankyo no tomo*, compiled by Minobe Shigekatsu and Keisei (Tokyo: Miyai Shoten, 1974), 3 and 12. There seems to be some disagreement about whether Keisei explicitly envisioned *Kankyo no tomo* as an educational text for women but given the identity of his client and the general use of the "woman" category in Part 2, it is reasonable to believe this a possibility. For an alternate reading, see: Rajyashree Pandey, "Women, Sexuality, and Enlightenment: *Kankyo no tomo*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 50, no. 3 (1995), 327: "...nowhere in *Kankyo no tomo* does Keisei state that he wrote the work for the religious education of women in general."

impermanence, faith, and compassion. Part 1 revolves around men, beginning with noblemen and gradually descending the social ladder to include monks and commoners. Part 2's stories all feature women as major characters, although they are not organized by rank like the men. The women in these stories come from a wide array of social classes and experiences. Their supposedly inherent feminine weaknesses are frequently on display, but they also at times show genuine goodness, piety, and even wisdom.

The female characters in *Kankyo no tomo* Part 2 demonstrate a surprising, although not universal, degree of access to awakening and the divine. Certainly, Keisei held with the doctrinal mainstream and viewed women as inferior and plagued by sin. On numerous occasions, women are the recipients of religious knowledge that has been mediated by men. Their upstanding and pious deeds are thus attributed to male characters rather than themselves. Despite this, there are also instances where women seem to reach conclusions about the nature of this world on their own, demonstrate levels of understanding that surprise their male counterparts, or receive communication from the Buddhas and bodhisattvas directly. Part 2 refuses to present a clear-cut image of women. After a brief overview of the Anglophone scholarship on the collection, I will investigate women's access to awakening, salvation, and knowledge in *Kankyo no tomo* Part 2. I argue for the influence of a heretofore ignored character in this text's creation: the woman who commissioned the work.

### **Scholarship on *Kankyo no tomo***

Scholarly coverage of the *Kankyo no tomo* in English has been fairly limited, particularly where Part 2 is concerned. When it does make an appearance, it tends to do so within broader discussions of the *setsuwa* genre as a whole or of specific narrative tropes in medieval literature.

For instance, Charlotte Eubanks' *Miracles of Book and Body: Buddhist Textual Culture and Medieval Japan* (2011) investigates the thematic equation of sacred Buddhist texts and the physical body in sutras and *setsuwa*, the latter of which Eubanks describes as explanations of Buddhist law for a lay audience.<sup>21</sup> *Kankyo no tomo* Story 2:9 features in their examination of the trope of meditation on decaying, impure bodies, where they consider the connection between the female body, sexual desire, and awakening within the *setsuwa* genre.<sup>22</sup> I will return to their treatment of the story at more length in my analysis of 2:9.

Michelle Osterfeld Li also examines possibilities for the body in her book, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales*. Li's objective is to consider how Western theories of the grotesque in literature and art, referring mostly to a strong focus on the exaggerated or supernaturally transformed body, can be selectively applied to the study of *setsuwa*.<sup>23</sup> She posits that in *setsuwa*, the grotesque both undermines authority and social norms while simultaneously affirming them.<sup>24</sup> *Kankyo no tomo* makes an appearance in her discussion of female demons, which I will return to in the section on Story 2:3.

*Writing Margins: The Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan*, Terry Kawashima's work on the literary disempowerment of women in the early medieval period, is another relevant book to our discussion. Kawashima examines processes of literary marginalization, such as the association of Ono no Komachi 小野小町 (c.825-c.900) with death and impurity rather than the poetry she left behind, as they developed gradually at the hands of

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body: Buddhist Textual Culture and Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 92-93 and 109.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98 and 102-103.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Osterfeld Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2-4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

male authors.<sup>25</sup> She also argues that modern scholars have unconsciously continued this marginalization of premodern Japanese women by assuming that male medieval authors were indeed at the uncontested center of their literary culture, a concern I wholeheartedly share.<sup>26</sup> We return to Kawashima in my analyses of stories 2:2 and 2:3, where she considers the religious devaluation of *asobi* and the demonization of women unwilling to conform to societal expectations.

The only scholarly work in English that addresses *Kankyo no tomo* Part 2 as a whole is Rajyashree Pandey's 1995 article "Women, Sexuality, and Enlightenment: *Kankyo no Tomo*," much of which is dedicated to a full translation of all eleven stories. Looking at the entirety of Part 2, Pandey makes the key observation that Keisei,

while subscribing to the accepted notion of the female as the embodiment of the seven grave sins, nonetheless present[s] a wide range of women from different social classes who are actively involved in their quest for salvation and for the most part are successful in doing so. It is above all the power of faith in the Buddha that works against any essentialist notion of the innate evil in women.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the variety of premises, individuals, and outcomes portrayed in the text makes it difficult to walk away with one firm view of how Keisei felt about women as a broad category.<sup>28</sup> Any contempt toward women is tempered by the religious message of the stories. Returning to the collection many years later, Pandey argues in *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Woman and Desire in Medieval Japan* that Keisei undermined the Buddhist morals at the heart of his stories by writing in a romantic, *monogatari*-like style evidenced in 2:1 (The Religious Awakening of a Nun in the Mountains of Tsu Province).<sup>29</sup> Pandey submits the theory that

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<sup>25</sup> Terry Kawashima, *Writing Margins: The Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 21-22, 175-179, and 190-194.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74 and 96-112.

<sup>27</sup> Pandey, "Women, Sexuality, and Enlightenment," 330.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>29</sup> Rajyashree Pandey, *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Woman, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), 133-135.

Keisei's literary tone empties his *fujōkan* narratives of any true disgust for the female body.

Although Pandey's argument decenters the Buddhist elements of the collection, she pushes her audience to reexamine Keisei's view of women with considerable nuance.

### **Analyzing the Social Context of *Kankyo no tomo*'s Creation**

Although the scholars mentioned thus far have all paid attention to Keisei's religious goals and the surrounding literary climate of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, they do not focus on *Kankyo no tomo*'s first audience: the noblewoman who commissioned the work. I generally agree with Pandey that *Kankyo no tomo*, while frequently critical of women and sometimes prone to presenting passive female characters, remains ambivalent about the relationship between women and the divine. It is possible that this ambiguity has some of its roots in the noblewoman's own desires and notions of faith. I contend that her interests are a crucial factor in understanding the depictions of women in *Kankyo no tomo*, even though she was not the author.

Heather Blair has argued convincingly for the application of "relational agency" in the study of premodern Japanese women; she urges us to look at powerful noblewomen's networks and the actions that others carry out on their behalf as an extension of their individual wills.<sup>30</sup> Clearly Keisei had much more creative control over *Kankyo no tomo* than Minamoto no Reishi's 源麗子 (1040-1114) various servants did in producing the *kanbun* prayers that Blair researches. I also recognize the impossibility of reconstructing Keisei's client from his stories. Nevertheless, her role in the enterprise should be kept in mind, as should the broader religious context that such a patroness was likely steeped in. As discussed above, Meeks has shown that belief in the

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<sup>30</sup> Heather Blair, "Ladylike Religion: Ritual and Agency in the Life of an Eleventh-Century Japanese Noblewoman," *History of Religions* 56, no. 1 (August 2016), 6-7.

possibility of salvation for women without rebirth as a man was prevalent in court salons.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, she explains that court women often saw monks as their employees and social inferiors.<sup>32</sup> Keisei therefore would have been navigating a patron-client relationship in which his doctrine-based superiority as a monk, or indeed as a man, might not have been taken for granted. Thus, it is worth decentering the male perspective while reading this text to reveal the complexities of its relationship to women from the standpoint of the intended female reader.

What does “decentering the male perspective” look like in practice, and especially in a text written by a man? I will not ignore Keisei’s motives, intentions, or assumptions. Rather, I will be paying attention to how the elite female perspective influenced his writing choices in terms of characters, lessons, and language. Simply put, it is reasonable to suppose that he sought to write something that his audience would connect with. Here, the terms “elite” and “female” are both integral: I argue that the affirmation of aristocratic tastes and superiority also informs Keisei’s treatment of certain characters who we might otherwise analyze only in terms of gender. Furthermore, as the female characters, and *not* the male characters that they interact with, are the protagonists and exemplars for our reader, I will be prioritizing their actions and emotions.<sup>33</sup> I will investigate what example they set regarding women’s potential if we do not start from the assumption that they are serving their male counterparts.

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<sup>31</sup> Meeks, *Hokkeji*, 69-70.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 77-79.

<sup>33</sup> The only exception to this is 2:6, which focuses on a man. I will explain this anomaly further in the relevant section, but in the remaining ten stories, the reader is meant to learn from the example set by a woman.



**Setting the Literary Stage: Story 2:1, The Religious Awakening of a Nun in the Mountains  
of Tsu Province**

This opening story begins with a description of a nun's dedicated ascetic lifestyle, characterized by her "shabby thatched hut" and her strict diet, consisting primarily of nearby nuts.<sup>34</sup> When questioned on her choices by someone who happens to meet her (possibly Keisei himself), she explains that she realized the impermanence of things upon the death of her husband and left behind her children and fields to seclude herself in the mountains.<sup>35</sup> Keisei briefly reflects on the many attachments that distract the hearts of "those who become women"; this is notably the only time he uses the word *onna* as a category *and* associates that category with negative qualities.<sup>36</sup> Because of these many attachments, Keisei observes that the mountain nun's understanding is especially noteworthy and commendable.<sup>37</sup> Keisei then argues against the sinfulness of lovers' vows to remain together in this life or the next. He strings together a long series of poetic references to stories of such vows that he finds both moving and "flagrantly disrespectful of the Buddhist precepts."<sup>38</sup>

A modern reader may find themselves wondering why the sequence of poetic allusions occupies more space than the actual story of the nun. The placement of the story at the beginning of the "women" section provides some clues. Keisei may have been motivated by a desire to show his literary resume and prove that he is up to the task of both educating and entertaining a noblewoman reader. All of the cited poems, many of which were included in the imperial anthologies that featured heavily in an aristocrat's education, may have caused a pleasant spark

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<sup>34</sup> Minobe Shigekatsu and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo* (Tokyo: Miyai Shoten, 1974), 124. For a full translation of all of the stories in Part 2, please refer to the appendix.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 125. The placement of such an observation at the beginning of Part 2 is also worth keeping in mind as we move forward.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-126.

of recognition in the mind of an aristocratic lady and highlighted the common literary and class background she shared with Keisei. This may have served to reassure her that she had picked someone capable of connecting and sympathizing with her, as well as someone well versed in the traditions important to the elite. Such a connection might have taken on an additional significance due to the perceived threat warriors posed to the political and cultural standing of aristocrats. Although he is focused on a slightly later era, Steven D. Carter has demonstrated that “court families described themselves as preservers of court traditions” and were invested in “preserving the symbolic value of court culture” once they no longer held full power.<sup>39</sup> It is possible that Keisei and his patroness saw themselves as allies in this work of preservation.

Of course, since the collection is meant to teach and this story is centered on the inevitable demise of romantic entanglements, Keisei also selected pieces relevant to that theme. He clearly sees this lesson as one especially important for lay women, specifying that women’s hearts are extremely prone to forming attachments.

As for those who become women, whether they are of high or low rank, although their hearts are attached to a thousand things, their [wishes] simply cannot be fulfilled and they give up...<sup>40</sup>

As mentioned in the summary above, this is the only moment in Part 2 in which Keisei directly associates a negative trait with women as a general group transcending even rank distinctions, and its placement at the beginning of the section cannot be overlooked.<sup>41</sup> This story is setting the tone for those that follow, and Keisei makes it clear that he holds some degree of pessimism regarding the majority of women’s chances of religious awakening. At the same time, the overall

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<sup>39</sup> Steven D. Carter, “Claiming the Past for the Present: Ichijō Kaneyoshi and *Tales of Ise*,” in *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan*, ed. David P. Knechtges and Eugene Vance (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005), 97 and 115.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>41</sup> We will return to this in 2:2 and 2:11, but for here it will suffice to point out that Keisei’s implication that rank or class difference does not matter is not entirely consistent with his portrayals of certain lower ranking characters.

positivity of this woman's story and most of those that follow it should not be overshadowed by this statement. Keisei's point is, after all, to highlight the possibility for awakening and the impressiveness of the 2:1 woman: "Therefore the heart that perceives [the truth of impermanence] must be quite profound!"<sup>42</sup> Both the nun's story that precedes the collection of poetic allusions and the following story, 2:2, are focused on the end of romantic relationships as proof of impermanence, and in both cases the women become awakened and sincerely take up austerities of their own accord.

### **An Incomparably Wise *Asobi*: Story 2:2, The Muro Lady is Abandoned by Akimoto and Experiences Awakening**

2:2 is one of several instances in *Kankyo no tomo* in which the protagonists are presented as transcending their relatively low social class or perceived failings through faith. To summarize, 2:2 tells the story of an *asobi*, or courtesan, who is left behind by the Middle Counselor Akimoto, causing her to realize the transience of the world and ultimately seek renunciation. When her mother passes away, she provides sexual services to the traveling underling of her former lover in order to raise the funds necessary for memorial services, and then takes the tonsure. The Middle Counselor later hears this story from his underling and is extremely moved.<sup>43</sup> In the end, Keisei remarks upon how rare a person like this *asobi* is in our world and declares that the Middle Counselor probably left her with this result in mind, implying that she may not have realized impermanence otherwise.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 126-129.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 129.

Kawashima sees this as Keisei attributing the *asobi*'s faith and religious dedication not to the *asobi* herself but to her former lover.<sup>45</sup> Kawashima devotes considerable time in her book to the religious capacities of *asobi* specifically in literature, and this story is incorporated within that discussion. In this case, her point is that any given *setsuwa*'s portrayal of an *asobi* may serve to belittle their own preexisting tradition of salvation via song in favor of male monastic-approved methods.<sup>46</sup> The 2:2 *asobi* devotes herself to nunhood, for instance, thereby choosing a life that monastics like Keisei would see as virtuous. This complements Janet Goodwin's assertion in her assessment of attitudes toward the premodern sex trade that *setsuwa* "neutralize the threat" of sexual desire embodied by *asobi* by making them suitably pious women.<sup>47</sup> In either case, Keisei's motivation in 2:2 is construed as a desire to subdue a dangerous woman.

Kawashima presents the Muro *asobi* as a character who has been made passive by force of the author's will, despite her eventual awakening.<sup>48</sup> She argues that

this act of piety, however, is credited not to the *asobi*'s own potential for goodness but to the influence of the Middle Counselor ... In this manner, the *asobi* not only is barred from unassisted communication with the divine while still in her secular manifestation but also is represented as incapable of generating her own desire to renounce the world in the manner endorsed by the narrator. Through these maneuvers, the woman entertainer is virtually stripped of the powers of agency: she becomes merely a passive receiver of assistance and influence.<sup>49</sup>

It is true that Keisei speculates that the Middle Counselor had a role in the Muro lady's awakening, and this does abruptly undermine her achievement.<sup>50</sup> He also describes the *asobi*'s profession as "shameful" and related to negative karma.<sup>51</sup> His disdain for *asobi* in particular,

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<sup>45</sup> Kawashima, *Writing Margins*, 63-64.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>47</sup> Janet R. Goodwin, *Selling Songs and Smiles: The Sex Trade in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 118.

<sup>48</sup> Kawashima, *Writing Margins*, 63-64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 129.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

which is Kawashima's central interest, is clear and may indeed have been part of a larger anti-*asobi* trend in early medieval literature. With this acknowledged, however, let's look further into the descriptions of the Muro lady's accomplishments prior to the mention of the Middle Counselor's role. Even if Keisei's patroness absorbed his messages about the failings of *asobi* (or looked down on them already from her position of high social status), would she have learned from this story that a woman like the Muro lady could only be saved by the actions of another?

Although the impetus for the *asobi*'s renunciation may have been her abandonment by the Middle Counselor, I propose that her resolve is shown to be unequivocally her own. When she returns to her home at Muro, she informs her mother of her decision in strong language and commands her to take that decision seriously, saying "I do not intend to behave as I did before. Understand this."<sup>52</sup> She shows determination to her practice despite her mother's unhappiness and express prohibition.<sup>53</sup> When she approaches the underling's boat to offer her services (an act that the story forgives due to its filial motivations), she responds almost defiantly to his offense and questioning, declaring that "I do know [whose boat this is]. Why should that matter?" and boarding without hesitation.<sup>54</sup> This is a person who will not be kept from her religious goals by the objections of others.

Despite Keisei's later attribution of this *asobi*'s development to the Middle Counselor's involvement, the Middle Counselor himself gives her the credit, claiming that her good qualities were visible all along: "As I expected, I saw her as a wise person, and she is even wiser [than I had thought]."<sup>55</sup> Not only did he already see her as having potential, but she exceeded his expectations! Keisei also gives the *asobi* a degree of respect, remarking:

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

People abandoned by a lover are ever consumed by resentment and sin; the fact that [this woman] single-mindedly forgot her feelings and made them into an aid for her escape from the floating world is quite wonderful. People regarded as impressive have failed to cut off the resentment in their hearts and have left behind fearsome reputations for themselves; the fact that [this woman] made [her experience] into a reason to leave the world was therefore especially incomparable.<sup>56</sup>

Even compared to “people regarded as impressive,” then, the Muro *asobi* is special.<sup>57</sup> She is wise, wonderful, and incomparable.<sup>58</sup> This recounting of her resolve is also phrased in an active way: she *made* her feelings and experiences into the tools for escaping the secular world. In this light, Keisei’s sudden focus on the Middle Counselor in the last sentence is incongruous with the rest of the story. It feels tacked on as an afterthought, and its apparent refusal to allow the Muro Lady to stand alone in the limelight is completely at odds with Keisei’s prior portrayal of her as a determined devotee. Although this denial exists, then, it is hard to say that it characterizes the entire story.

Even if we do focus on the ending and the more negative aspects of Keisei’s character assessment, such as the shame attached to the *asobi* profession, we should wonder if this derision and transplantation of merits should be seen primarily as one motivated by the lady’s status as a woman. On the contrary, I argue that Keisei’s preference for the Middle Counselor has a stronger connection to class. At no point in the story does Keisei make any statements about women’s capacities or challenges, something he does in 2:1 and could have done again here.<sup>59</sup> It is additionally instructive to consider in which instances Keisei chooses to qualify the successes of his female characters. Among the Part 2 stories that result in salvation for the female protagonist, only one other story (aside from 2:2) includes any degree of direct condescension towards the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 125.

female character from Keisei: 2:11 (The Story of a Young Girl from Higashiyama who Attains Rebirth in the Pure Land). I will return to this story later, but for now it will suffice to note that this girl is “poor and low-born,” and her social status is pointed to as an expected obstacle to her practice.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, none of the successful noblewomen are given this treatment. I therefore suggest that Keisei’s denouncement of the *asobi* is likely based more on class status than sex, as is his decision to credit the aristocratic Middle Counselor with this unexpected victory. Perhaps such sentiment would have resonated with an aristocratic patroness. Whether or not she took heed of the abrupt shift at the end, this story does not offer a strong case for pessimism regarding her own sex.

**A Cautionary Tale of Transformation: Story 2:3, A Deeply Resentful Woman Becomes a Demon While Alive**

In an otherwise fairly optimistic collection of stories, 2:3 is the most pessimistic by far, providing us with a useful counterpoint to the collection’s more positive pieces. A young woman in Mino province, the daughter of “a man of no low standing,” becomes the romantic partner of a man who then gradually ceases his visits.<sup>61</sup> Depressed, the woman refuses to leave her bed or eat, until one night when her anguished feelings become too great to bear. She makes her hair into five horns using rice jelly as an adhesive and runs away into the night, not to be found until about thirty years later.<sup>62</sup> By this time, she has become a murderous demon living in an abandoned temple hall; when the frightened local people burn down her home, she rushes out to tell her story and express her regret for resenting and killing her lover, asks that the crowd perform

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 158-160.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

memorial services on her behalf, and leaps into the flames to her death.<sup>63</sup> Keisei remarks on her piteousness and deliberately leaves the reader in the dark regarding whether or not memorial services were performed for this woman.<sup>64</sup>

The case of the woman-turned-demon is no exception to Li's theory that the grotesque in *setsuwa* both undermines and reaffirms social norms at the same time.<sup>65</sup> As a character archetype, the female demon is not passive like the ideal court woman but takes control and even revenge in a society that would deny her both. Precisely because of this, she is portrayed as dangerous, despicable, and pitiable.<sup>66</sup> Li's focus is on the association of women and their strong emotions (such as jealousy) with the demonic and how this association may have been empowering for medieval women; after all, the 2:3 woman actively chose to make herself into a demon and seek revenge. Fujiwara Keiko likewise points out how demon women in *setsuwa* transmute femininity and women's passions into power, which our demoness wields as a real threat by killing and devouring her former lover and other area residents.<sup>67</sup>

However, the power that she is able to obtain is tempered by her fate after she murders her lover. As Kawashima observes, the life that the 2:3 protagonist is forced to take up is an "antisocial" one.<sup>68</sup> After taking her revenge, she is unable to return to her human form, lives distanced from human society, and causes harm to more people.<sup>69</sup> In her own description, her life is characterized by pain, hunger, and shame:

I was too ashamed to go back to the world... Because of the sad way of living beings, I cannot hide my desire for food. My deeds are all painful, and my suffering is hard to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>65</sup> Li, *Ambiguous Bodies*, 2-3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>67</sup> Fujiwara Keiko, "Setsuwa ni okeru oni no kenkyū: Kijo seiritsu no shūhen," *Okayama daigaku kokugo kenkyū* 6 (1992), 34.

<sup>68</sup> Kawashima, *Writing Margins*, 266.

<sup>69</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 131-132.



convey. Night and day, it feels as though my insides are burning, and my regrets and feelings of futility are boundless.<sup>70</sup>

The 2:3 demon woman is only able to receive some relief from her suffering through the religious acts of the nearby townsfolk and clergy, and this is only true if we optimistically decide to believe that they did indeed perform memorial services on her behalf. Keisei's pessimism regarding her afterlife shows the reader that even this woman's sincere repentance and self-sacrifice cannot make up for her "one moment's obstructed thought."<sup>71</sup>

Unfortunately, all of the above observations indicate that a "resuscitation" of this character may not be possible. Furthermore, unlike 2:2, this story does seem to implicate women as a category. On one hand, Keisei does not offer any commentary on the nature of women; if, as Fujiwara says, demoness *setsuwa* suggest that passion-driven demons lie dormant within all women, Keisei does not say so directly.<sup>72</sup> He also uses the word 恨み *urami* (resentment) rather than the more explicitly feminized 嫉妬 *shitto* (jealousy). Even so, when the demoness tells her story to the men who have come to kill her, she asks that they warn *their wives and children* not to follow her example; notably, she does not warn *them* of the hazards of resentment, implying that she does not worry that adult men will fall prey to this emotion as she did.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, this cautionary tale has no equivalent in the male-focused first part of the collection. Most devout Buddhist readers would not be able to see a positive example in this woman, and it is likely that the audience would have at least been somewhat aware that her sex was connected to her failings.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Fujiwara, "Kijō seiritsu," 28.

<sup>73</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 132.

If there was any room for optimism in our patroness' mind while reading this story, it might have come from comparing herself favorably with the demon woman. In assessing the transformation of hair from the symbol of a beautiful, weak woman into the symbol of a terrifying demon in many medieval demoness stories, Fujiwara suggests that the act of putting the hair up into horns slightly resembles the cutting of hair for renunciates in stories about "leaving the home."<sup>74</sup> Certainly both the 2:3 demoness and a nun would have been separated from the life of a public woman, and would have destroyed the symbol of their beauty and femininity with the changing of their hair. Of course, being a nun would naturally be the more desired and acceptable option. Given the uncertainty of her identity, it is not entirely clear whether or not Keisei's patroness had taken any precepts already or if she planned to in the future, but either situation is plausible.<sup>75</sup> Even if we disregard the question of her lay or renunciate status, she was already a woman devout enough to seek out religious education and fund a monk's endeavors. She may not have been inclined to identify herself with a murderous demon regardless of their shared sex. Sadly, the text lacks clear guides to a less condemnatory reading, and we have to accept that its stance on women is ambiguous at best. As it is the only story in *Kankyo no tomo* Part 2 without an optimistic ending for its female protagonist, we should not let it cancel out the other entries.

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<sup>74</sup> Fujiwara, "Kijo seiritsu," 31.

<sup>75</sup> Shikikenmon'in took the tonsure in 1239, and Ankamon'in did so in 1235. If either of them is, in fact, our mystery patroness, this would mean that they were neither renunciates nor close to becoming so when *Kankyo no tomo* was commissioned. Of course, we cannot know what they may have had in mind for their futures, but nunhood was a common path for noblewomen.

**A Comforting Pivot: Story 2:4, A Sutra Recitation Service is Performed Using a Poor,  
Dead Woman's Hair**

This extremely short aside marks our return to the ranks of devout women and, despite its tragic themes, provides a clear alternative to the fate of the demon lady. A woman who is by birth a member of the ill-fated Taira family has, despite the troubles of her lineage, spent her life uneventfully as the adopted daughter of another family.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, she dies prematurely of unknown circumstances, and is shortly followed by her adopted mother.<sup>77</sup> The woman's husband arrives at her house lamenting to her sister that he cannot afford to commission many religious services for the late mother.<sup>78</sup> He then reveals that he has brought some of the late adopted daughter's hair, which he hopes will be enough for a sutra recitation service.<sup>79</sup> The husband and the sister cry over the memories that the hair carries, and then the sister asks that the hair be removed from her sight.<sup>80</sup> In contrast to every other story in Part 2, Keisei offers us no moral statements, no assessments, and no explicit reason why he chose to include this particular tale in the first place.<sup>81</sup>

Aside from the standard instruction on impermanence via the woman's untimely death, Keisei's decision to put this story right after the demon-transformation tale may be due to the use of hair. As described above, in 2:3, the abandoned lady shapes her hair into horns as part of her intentional transformation into a demon. In 2:4, on the other hand, a woman's hair is put to a much more moral and unthreatening use as the payment for religious services. Hair, and

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<sup>76</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 133.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>81</sup> All of the other stories are accompanied by some sort of closing comment, but it is worth noting that 2:8, A Secret Imperial Visit to the Retreat of Lady Kenreimon'in, also lacks a forthright explanation of its moral in Keisei's voice. Perhaps Keisei felt that stories about the Heike (or their descendants, in 2:4's case) automatically evoked sympathy and impermanence and required no further explanation.

women's hair in particular, was frequently seen as the site of a person's life force, sexuality, and sometimes even spiritual power, as Gary L. Ebersole has observed.<sup>82</sup> We are warned of the dangerous potential of hair in 2:3, but 2:4 sees the hair (and all it is associated with) tamed by religious ceremony. The possibility for hair to be controlled and "put to good use" may have been reassuring both to author and audience after the disturbing events of 2:3. A woman's life force does not have to become a threat to those around her and ultimately herself, but can also be made into a source of merit that benefits her and her relatives. It can be part of her identification – in life and in death – with the Buddhist community.

Hair as a site of life force and sexuality may have been especially important to Keisei and his patroness as members of the elite class. Pandey has made a case for its use in literature (and particularly the *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (Tale of Genji, ca. 1008), which would have been familiar to our author and reader as aristocrats) as

more than simply a material attribute. Like robes, it serves as the privileged repository of both the physical and psychic attributes that go toward the constitution of the female body/self.<sup>83</sup>

Pandey argues that, in literary romances, not only were hair and robes absolutely crucial to a woman's eroticism, they carried their owner's feelings and qualities.<sup>84</sup> She posits that "it is through hair that women are able to gauge and express their own feelings..."<sup>85</sup> an idea that the demon transformation story would support. It is difficult to ascertain the feelings of the deceased woman in 2:4, given that we do not know much about her personality in life. However, we can see the feelings of filial devotion and piety that her hair inspires in the husband and sister and

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<sup>82</sup> Ebersole, Gary L, "‘Long Black Hair Like a Seat Cushion’: Hair Symbolism in Japanese Popular Religion," in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (Clayton, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 85-86.

<sup>83</sup> *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 45-46.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

carries with it as it becomes an offering. If Keisei's noble patroness was indeed familiar with stories of literary court ladies using their hair to express religious devotion and disillusionment with the impermanent world, as we could well expect of someone of her status, this may have leant 2:4's rebuttal of 2:3 extra weight.

**The Sisterhood of the Traveling Silk Robe: Story 2:5, The Story of a Woman Who Visits  
Hase Kannon Every Month**

In an entire set of stories about women, story 2:5 might be the most woman-centric of the bunch, as it celebrates women's connections with each other and focuses on their specific concerns. A woman who has repeatedly failed to find financial support through her work at the court approaches Kannon at Hase Temple and begs for help one last time.<sup>86</sup> In a dream vision, a monk tells her to steal the silk robe of the noblewoman lying next to her and run away; after some shame and hesitation, she obeys.<sup>87</sup> While fleeing the temple wearing the silk robe, the woman is mistaken for a noblewoman by a passing aristocrat, who falls in love with her and makes her his wife.<sup>88</sup> A few years later, the pair visit the capital on business and the wife spuriously claims that they can stay with her older sister.<sup>89</sup> The wife enters a seemingly random house and explains the entire situation to the mistress, who is revealed to be the woman from whom the wife stole the silk robe.<sup>90</sup> Because the pair has brought many valuable goods with them as gifts, this woman is narrowly saved from destitution. Believing this turn of events to be the compassionate plan of Kannon, the two women vow to be sisters to one another for the rest

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<sup>86</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 134.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139.

of their lives.<sup>91</sup> These are the events of the story, but aside from teaching faith in Kannon, what about this tale may have resonated with Keisei's patroness?

I suggest that Keisei might have chosen pilgrimage, the method by which the protagonist establishes her connection to Kannon, as a backdrop for this story on the grounds that it would have been extremely familiar to a noblewoman. In an early article, Barbara Ambros argues for the centrality of pilgrimages in court women's religious devotion in the Heian period. The trips allowed for a relatively immobile population to leave their quarters, take a journey with their retinue, sightsee along the way, and address what Ambros saw as the particularly gendered worries of their lives.<sup>92</sup> For instance, a visit to a miracle temple might be intended to bring about a pregnancy or the safe birth of a child, an issue unique to women and especially important to aristocrats.<sup>93</sup> Ambros is addressing an earlier era, but aristocrats were very invested in maintaining court culture in the Kamakura period as well.<sup>94</sup>

If we consider the details of the 2:5 woman's pilgrimage, it seems very possible that Keisei chose certain elements knowing that his patron might find them relatable. Kannon seems to have been the most popular deity for women seeking miracles and had appeared in existing famous literature such as *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記 (Record of Miraculous Events in Japan, c.822) and *Genji monogatari* to save financially distressed women via marriage to wealthy men, and Hase Temple deserves particular recognition as a frequent destination for worshippers hoping for this result.<sup>95</sup> This is notably a gender-specific concern, and is exactly what is addressed in 2:5 when the protagonist is rewarded for her faith and obedience with a husband

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>92</sup> Barbara Ambros, "Liminal Journeys: Pilgrimages of Noblewomen in Mid-Heian Japan," *Journal of Japanese Religious Studies* 24, no. 3-4 (1997), 305, 307, 317, and 328-340.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 334-336.

<sup>94</sup> Meeks, *Hokkeji*, 81-86.

<sup>95</sup> Ambros, "Liminal Journeys," 304 and 329-330.

who is rich, “is respected by many people,” and sees her as “peerlessly wonderful.”<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, receiving dreams relating to one’s wish was a common goal among visitors to religious institutions.<sup>97</sup> In accordance with the hopes of many other women in her situation, the protagonist receives direct, unmediated communication from Kannon advising her next actions.

Another aspect of 2:5 that deserves attention is the story’s central relationship: that between the protagonist and the noblewoman whose silk robe she steals. The reunion of the two women is the emotional highlight of the story, and is presented as the culmination of Kannon’s divine plan.<sup>98</sup> Their vow to be sisters to each other for the rest of their lives appears to be just as much of a reward for their faith as the protagonist’s marriage to the nobleman.<sup>99</sup> The connection between the two women is honored as a conduit for the further development of faith as well, despite the story’s general focus on material concerns. Upon sharing her recent hardships until now, the noblewoman tearfully informs the protagonist, “You have shone light upon my path by bringing various things, and although on one hand I feel that this is your compassion, on the other hand I feel that these are the gifts of the Buddha...”<sup>100</sup> This is a story in which Keisei’s patroness might have recognized herself or those close to her in a hopeful, celebratory way unmarred by any discussions of women’s flaws or sins.

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<sup>96</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 137.

<sup>97</sup> Ambros, “Liminal Journeys,” 315 and 322.

<sup>98</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 139.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

**Exemplars from a Distant Land: Story 2:6, The Elder Brother of the Empress of China  
Becomes Poor and Takes Care of Others**

Following 2:5's celebration of sisterhood comes 2:6, a mysteriously man-centered tale that moves us out of Japan to admire compassionate behavior found in China. The Empress' brother unexpectedly runs away from the court to wander about the country.<sup>101</sup> Because people do not know who he is, he is subject to frequent mistreatment.<sup>102</sup> Even though the Empress brings him home with great effort and secures his agreement to stay in place, he sneaks out and continues his wandering on numerous occasions.<sup>103</sup> With some consternation, the Empress proclaims a new law that poor wanderers must be taken care of throughout the land. As may be expected, the benefits of this order go far beyond the Empress' brother and change many lives.<sup>104</sup> Keisei informs us that portraits of this brother as an impoverished wanderer are frequently produced and sold in China.<sup>105</sup> He marvels at the man's "rare and compassionate heart" which enabled him to observe the plight of those less fortunate and act on their behalf.<sup>106</sup>

2:6 may well be the most enigmatic entry in all of Part 2 if only because the main character is a man. While the Empress has a role to play, we are given no insight into, for instance, whether she learns to be a better person than she was before or if she is ever rewarded for *her* imperial decree. Her creation of a law that helps an enormous number of people is glossed over in favor of her brother's supposed plot to inspire that law: "He saw that at that time, there were many poor people in the world and they could not even request things [that they needed], and in order to help them, he wandered around [like them]."<sup>107</sup> As she goes unjudged,

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 141.



there is no reason to think that Keisei is condemning her, but she is rendered a non-presence even though she took action. If one were looking for instances of women being undermined in *Kankyo no tomo*, 2:6 might well be the most conspicuous example. Why would Keisei include a story in which the female character neither learns nor teaches anything and a man is the one setting an example? Unfortunately, an obvious answer is not forthcoming. Keisei does not offer helpful commentary on this point. Perhaps Keisei thought that the Empress' solution to her brother's situation was exemplary, or he may have meant to present her as a hindrance on her brother's path that had to be overcome. Of course, because she is utterly lacking in description, we cannot know for certain if she is meant to be a good, bad, or neutral figure. Although the moral of selfless compassion is clearly communicated, the reasoning for this story's placement in the women's section remains a mystery.

Fortunately, not everything about 2:6 is obscure; for instance, we know that it is set in the China of "long ago" and that Keisei apparently heard it during his own trip there.<sup>108</sup> Keisei traveled to China in 1217-1218 to study and acquire sutras, although unfortunately not much seems to be known about his time on the continent.<sup>109</sup> In fact, scholars believe that he began writing *Kankyo no tomo* while in China.<sup>110</sup> From his perspective, there may have been some pressure to demonstrate the knowledge of China so appreciated among Japanese elites and to prove that his time abroad had been well spent. At the same time, however, there is nothing about 2:6 that seems to make its setting necessary for the story or moral.

Discussing near-contemporary historiographic and literary texts, Erin L. Brightwell has argued that for some medieval Japanese writers "...the China suitable for cultural appropriation

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>109</sup> Pandey, "Women, Sexuality, and Enlightenment," 333. Pandey informs us that he brought back over two hundred volumes of sutras, which is quite an achievement.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

was carefully and thoroughly cleansed of anything that tied it to the sociopolitical entity across the sea...” and that teaching widely agreed upon morals via an “unmarked” China of the distant past was more suited to courtly tastes than using a contemporary China marked by political and religious decline.<sup>111</sup> Stories of China’s more recent tumultuous history were perhaps unappealing to many courtiers because it too closely resembled the threat they felt themselves facing in the form of the new warrior government.<sup>112</sup> This might explain why both 2:6 and 2:7 are set in a “long ago” China that bears no obviously Chinese traits but is nonetheless home to moral exemplars. I have discussed the author and patroness’ class multiple times already, and it could be a factor here as well if this type of “China” appealed to aristocrats. On the other hand, Keisei’s suggestion that images of the Empress’ brother are popular in contemporary China breaks with this pattern.<sup>113</sup> I will leave further examination of pictures for the next story, but this scene in 2:6 should be kept in mind as we proceed.

### **Redemption from the Sin of Greed: Story 2:7, A Man from China Hears the Laments of His Cow and Horse and Experiences Religious Awakening**

Keisei keeps us in China for story 2:7, which presents us with an unlikely redemption story for a man and his daughter. A wealthy man climbs into a tree at night to observe the moon and overhears a conversation between his horse and cow.<sup>114</sup> They are complaining of the hard work and beatings that he subjects them to, and he realizes abruptly that worldly wealth has made him into a cruel person.<sup>115</sup> He announces to his wife and daughter that he is leaving them,

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<sup>111</sup> Brightwell, *Reflecting the Past*, 159-160 and 195.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 141.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

to which they insist upon coming along with him.<sup>116</sup> The family sets up a hermitage in the mountains and attempts to make a living selling baskets, of which they make three in a day that the man's daughter is sent out to sell.<sup>117</sup> Unfortunately, the daughter has no luck selling baskets for three days in a row and has now accumulated nine baskets and no money.<sup>118</sup> She is worrying about her parents' well-being when she sees a string of coins lying in the road. She decides to take the cost of her nine baskets from the string and leave the baskets themselves with the remaining coins for the owner to find.<sup>119</sup>

When she returns home, her father is furious that she took so much without understanding the situation, regretting that she has "this clouded of a heart."<sup>120</sup> He sends her back to return the coins and retrieve the baskets. Upon completing her task, she finds her parents lying next to each other, having passed away.<sup>121</sup> Saying that there is no use in her living any longer, the daughter lies down next to her parents and promptly dies.<sup>122</sup> Keisei tells us how moved he was when he heard this story. He wonders "what kind of bodhisattvas these three people from long ago are now" and prays that his heart "might be the same as theirs."<sup>123</sup> Lastly, he informs the reader that images of this family are drawn and sold, and laments that pictures of such people would not likely not be produced or bought in Japan.<sup>124</sup>

One could read the second half of 2:7 as a condemnation of the daughter's greed (selfishness being one of the seven grave vices of women); she takes what is not hers without permission, and her father additionally censures her for taking too much: "Even if you were

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 144-145.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

going to take it, you should have left behind and taken the price for *one* basket! What kind of person would buy nine baskets for just one person?”<sup>125</sup> The entire family dies as a result of her poor decisions. Killing or otherwise causing the death of one’s parents is a deep sin, so the modern reader may expect a bad fate for the daughter along the lines of the 2:3 demon woman. They would be surprised in the end to discover that Keisei envisions a rebirth in a buddha’s land as bodhisattvas for “these *three* people” (emphasis mine), including the daughter.<sup>126</sup>

I contend that the moral of 2:7 is the possibility of redemption via repentance, and that it is because of her willingness to repent that the daughter is ultimately saved alongside her parents. When she is told to return the money, she does so without complaint, which is not what one would expect from one driven by greed and unwilling to improve. Furthermore, although her taking the money is portrayed as wrong, her thoughts prior to the theft reveal appropriately filial concern for her parents to be her primary motive: “It must be difficult for my parents to continue living. What should I do?”<sup>127</sup> Her unwillingness to live on after their sudden deaths demonstrates the same filial sentiment. She is not an irredeemably bad person. A reading of the character as one who corrects her mistakes and is redeemed would also bring her in tune with the first part of the story, in which her father realizes his own flaws and throws away his wealth to atone. It is also worth noting that neither the father nor Keisei make any directly gendered comments about the daughter’s character, and her sins are not treated as any more severe than her father’s abuse of animals. As with 2:6, most of the real virtue is still attributed to the main male character, as the father is the one who moves the family away from society and tells the daughter how to behave. 2:7 is a complicated and even confusing story. Like several others in the collection, it

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 144.

cannot be easily categorized regarding its relationship to women, but generally takes a hopeful tone towards even those who have done wrong.

As 2:7 is the second in the pair of entries set in China, I will now revisit the representation of “China” contained therein. Just as it was in 2:6, our setting is the unspecified distant past in a land that is said to be China but lacks any identifying details. In terms of the preference of aristocratic readers, then, both of these stories fit into the pattern that Brightwell identified in the *mirror* genre, cited above. However, Keisei’s final remarks do not quite match:

I was told that the images of these people are now drawn and sold! Throughout all of China, [people feel that] this sort of thing shows wonderful compassion, even after [those three people] have passed away. In this country of Yamato, there is probably no one who would buy the images of such people. People who would try to draw and sell [those images] are also likely rare.<sup>128</sup>

While the drawing and selling of religious images appeared in 2:6 as well, here Keisei is much more overt in his praise of the people of contemporary China, especially when compared to those of Japan. Although it is a short passage, if this is indeed atypical for his era, we should wonder why it has been included. It is possible that Keisei is trying to convince his audience that he, as someone who has been to China and met the people who would buy such images, is highly virtuous and knowledgeable. He may also be arguing for the continued relevance of China in religious matters. It is impossible to know what the patroness’ reaction to this might have been, but as she would likely have known of his experience in China, anecdotes from his trip might have been expected or desired.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 145.

**Finding Hope and Wisdom Through Tragedy: Story 2:8, A Secret Imperial Visit to the  
Retreat of Lady Kenreimon'in**

2:8 provides a somewhat unconventional look at a famous historical and literary figure, imbuing her with an unexpected degree of optimism and understanding when compared to her male interlocutor. The story recounts the visit of Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa 後白河 (r. 1155-1158) to the hermitage of the former empress consort Kenreimon'in 建礼門院 (1155-1214) in 1186.<sup>129</sup> The lady in question has become a nun after losing many of her relatives at the Battle of Dan'noura.<sup>130</sup> In 2:8, she has devoted herself to praying for the afterlives of her deceased family members, especially her son.<sup>131</sup> The Retired Emperor and his traveling companions observe Kenreimon'in's materially reduced state and are overtaken by pity.<sup>132</sup> Kenreimon'in rebukes the visitors for their sadness, asserting that the troubles she has suffered have brought her to her current religious practices, for which she is happy and grateful.<sup>133</sup> Recounting her horrible memories of the battle and the loss of her son, she tells the Retired Emperor how her mother pleaded with her to survive and perform austerities on behalf of those who died.<sup>134</sup> She expresses both the importance of her practices and true optimism for her own salvation, and the Retired Emperor's party returns home awed and moved.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Kenreimon'in was the daughter of family head Taira no Kiyomori and his wife, Taira no Tokiko 平時子 (1126-1185); her mother appears in 2:8 and is among the deceased at Dan'noura. She was empress consort to Emperor Takakura 高倉 (r. 1168-1180) and mother to the young Emperor Antoku 安德 (r. 1180-1185), the latter of whom also died in the battle.

<sup>130</sup> The final battle of the Genpei Wars. The Taira were finally defeated by their rival Minamoto clan's forces in 1185.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 146-147.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 149.

This episode has been recorded more famously and at greater length in the *Kanjō no maki* 灌頂の巻 (Initiates' Scroll) of the *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 (Tale of the Heike). When exactly the stories that became the *Heike* began circulating orally and when they may have first been written down is unclear, and it is hard to know what Keisei's sources were or to which versions of Kenreimon'in's story he had been exposed.<sup>136</sup> The *Enkyō-bon* 延慶本, believed by scholars to be the oldest written variant, dates to 1309-1310, and was closely tied to major Buddhist institutions like Enryakuji.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, the *Kanjō no maki*, which details Kenreimon'in's life after the battle and until her death, is unique to the *Kakuichi-bon* 覚一本, which was dictated by a Heike performer to his disciple in 1371.<sup>138</sup> This version seems to be the more favored one among modern Anglophone scholars, having been translated into English three times. Due to the 150-year gap between the texts, we cannot assume that Keisei would have heard the exact stories contained therein, and I will not be discussing those episodes which have no equivalent in 2:8 (such as Kenreimon'in's prophetic dream or rebirth in the Pure Land). Nonetheless, comparing the two versions of Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa's visit can reveal some insights into Keisei's priorities as a writer and instructor. While the *events* of the visit are virtually the same in both versions, Kenreimon'in describes her own *emotions* toward her past and present circumstances in different ways, acting notably more grateful for the changes in her life in 2:8 than in the *Kakuichi Heike*.

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<sup>136</sup> In a conversation with me, Joan Piggott remarked that some recent scholars believe that the 1220s were in fact when the *Heike* may have first been recorded. Joan Piggott, personal communication, February 25, 2021. If so, Keisei might have been aware of some early version. Keisei's own explanation is that "this is recorded in the texts about this Retired Emperor," which is not very exact. Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 149.

<sup>137</sup> David T. Bialock, "Outcasts, Emperorhip, and Dragon Cults in 'The Tale of the Heike,'" *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 13 (2002-2003), 229.

<sup>138</sup> Royall Tyler, "Introduction," in *The Tale of the Heike*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), xx.

Those familiar with any *Heike* version of the imperial visit episode may have an idea of Kenreimon'in as a figure primarily characterized by misery. R. Keller Kimbrough has pointed to her as one of several court women who, in keeping with contemporary literary conventions, exemplifies the tragic beauty “fallen to poverty and shame” in her later years.<sup>139</sup> In particular, he notes Kenreimon'in as one “whose latter days are described... as those of an animal...”<sup>140</sup> We see this misery in the Tyler translation of the *Kanjō no maki* when, for instance, the Retired Emperor expresses his sympathy and Kenreimon'in expresses extreme loneliness in her current state and transitions into her wartime recollections as follows:

At last she managed to swallow her tears. “It is painful, of course,” she then went on, “to find myself reduced to what I am now, but my present state is also a joy, since it gives me hope for enlightenment in the hereafter.”<sup>141</sup>

She ends her story in a similarly somber manner: “What I have been through corresponds, so it seems to me, to experiencing the agonies of the six realms of reincarnation.”<sup>142</sup>

The optimistic note concerning her future enlightenment should not be overlooked, of course, but the emotional framing of Kenreimon'in's story in the *Kanjō no maki* remains markedly different from that in the *Kankyō no tomo*. In the latter, when the Retired Emperor asks “How much have you been harmed and reduced?” her response is, “What about my life is poor

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<sup>139</sup> R. Keller Kimbrough and Sei Shōnagon, “Apocryphal Texts and Literary Identity: Sei Shōnagon and ‘The Matsushima Diary,’” *Monumenta Nipponica* 57, no. 2 (2002), 137. In this article, Kimbrough translates and introduces the *Matsushima nikki* 松島日記 (*The Matsushima Diary*), which was commonly attributed to Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (c. 966 – 1017 or 1025), the famed author of *Makura no sōshi* 枕草子 (*The Pillow Book*, 1002). The *nikki* follows an unnamed, traveling court woman and her sufferings. His discussion of the significance of this text includes an analysis of narratives about Shōnagon's later years, which he argues fit the same “reduced court lady” convention as stories about Kenreimon'in. It is worth noting that Kimbrough's observation that Kenreimon'in's later years were described as animal-like, which I have quoted above, specifically refers to the *Enkyō-bon*. Since that version was more directly aligned than the *Kakuichi-bon* with Keisei's own Tendai sect, the contrast between a miserable Kenreimon'in and the woman we see in 2:8 is perhaps even more surprising.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *The Tale of the Heike*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 700.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 704.



and painful? It has been the wonderful cause of my coming to the Buddhist path!”<sup>143</sup> Rather than agree with the Retired Emperor’s assessment of her life despite its religious benefits, as *Heike Kenreimon’in* does, the 2:8 *Kenreimon’in* contradicts him in a forthright manner. Although she readily concedes that she “did not think I would possibly live until today,” she also concludes her story by saying, “how could the many buddhas and bodhisattvas not save me? Therefore, [had those events not occurred] I believe there would have been nothing to lead me to the Buddhist path that I am now on.”<sup>144</sup> Rather than acting merely as sad proof that the most powerful and beautiful will still wither, she seems almost triumphant, having found meaning and hope in her suffering.

In this light, *Kenreimon’in*’s role vis-à-vis the Retired Emperor comes to resemble that of a teacher. After all, she has presented reflections on her experiences as an admonishment to correct his misunderstanding. Even her attendant nun demonstrates more understanding than the Retired Emperor, who cannot see why *Kenreimon’in* would pick flowers for religious services herself. He must be reminded by the attendant of the importance of ascetic practices for attaining a good rebirth.<sup>145</sup> Certainly, the Retired Emperor appears as someone who needs to learn from these women, which is a powerful testament to the importance of the emotional framing that I described above. My only small reservation here is that he never explicitly expresses that he has learned anything from the visit or even praises *Kenreimon’in*. We will see a much clearer example of this dynamic in the next story. Regardless, Keisei’s choice to emphasize the positives of *Kenreimon’in*’s nunhood, easily explained by his goal of providing a Buddhist education, has

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<sup>143</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 148.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147.

made her into a character who demonstrates more perseverance, faith, and wisdom than a high-ranked man.

Keisei's framing also assigns a purpose to Kenreimon'in's character that is in service to his patroness' education first and foremost. Let us briefly return to the *Kanjō no maki*: what was Kenreimon'in's purpose there? Many scholars hold that the inclusion of the story was meant to calm the spirits of the fallen Taira, and that, as a woman, Kenreimon'in was especially suited to the task of staying behind and praying.<sup>146</sup> Disagreeing with this reading, David T. Bialock has argued extensively that the *Kanjō no maki* has an esoteric meaning that identifies Kenreimon'in and Antoku with the Dragon King's daughter from the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>147</sup> This reading would imply that the deceased Taira do not need to be sped along the path to enlightenment, account for the lady's surprising spiritual abilities, and take us away from a purely instrumental reading of Kenreimon'in's character.<sup>148</sup> The dream sequence and references to the *Lotus Sutra* that Bialock bases his argument upon do not appear in 2:8, but I appreciate his push against the idea that Kenreimon'in's nunhood *only* serves her family. In 2:8, the tragedy becomes an impetus for *personal* piety and salvation, and this is as much the focus of the story as Kenreimon'in's duty to help her relatives, if not more so. The character is also meant to serve the reader; she will hopefully inspire another woman to believe in her own religious potential.

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<sup>146</sup> Bialock, "Outcasts, Emperorship and Dragon Cults," 294-295.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-297 and 302-303.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 298-299.

**A Noblewoman in the Role of Religious Instructor: Story 2:9, A Court Woman of the  
Palace Shows her Impure Form**

Story 2:9 gives us a chance to reconsider the frequently male-centered trope of *fujōkan* 不浄観, or meditation on decaying bodies in order to cut off sexual desire. As Hitomi Tonomura has pointed out in her landmark study of the *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (Tales of Times Now Past, 12<sup>th</sup> century), the use of this trope in the *Konjaku* and other medieval texts often “configure[s] the female body as an object of observation, an entity dissociated from her own humanity[.]”<sup>149</sup> However, as I will argue below, 2:9 does not fit so easily with other contemporary *fujōkan* stories, and this may be related to its female audience. To summarize the events of the story, a monk becomes enamored with a noblewoman and reaches out to her regarding his affections.<sup>150</sup> When he does eventually visit her, she has purposefully neglected to care for her appearance for several days and reveals the true impurity of her body to him.<sup>151</sup> He hurries away, thankful to have encountered a wise friend to restore his religious dedication.<sup>152</sup> Keisei concludes with a brief paragraph warning his reader that all people are impure, regardless of current physical beauty.<sup>153</sup>

Eubanks brings in 2:9 in their third chapter as part of an analysis of *fujōkan*. They point out that the woman’s role in this and similar stories is to be observed as a lesson for men, but also astutely note that the audience for *setsuwa* went beyond the monastic hall to laypeople concerned with the purity of monks, including female patrons.<sup>154</sup> They go on to suggest that

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<sup>149</sup> Hitomi Tonomura, “Black Hair and Red Trousers: Gendering the Flesh in Medieval Japan,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 1 (1994), 145.

<sup>150</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 150.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>154</sup> Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body*, 99.

*fujōkan* narratives rendered the body internally pure and fit for storing the Dharma through an external show of impurity.<sup>155</sup> Eubanks uses 2:9 as evidence that women were made into objects of instruction. They also see the story as supporting the connection they see between erotic desire and awakening in the *setsuwa* genre as a whole. In their view, the monk of the story effectively completes a romantic conquest like those found in literary tales.<sup>156</sup> Rather than highlight the pitfalls of desire, this story and other *fujōkan*-focused *setsuwa* entice the audience via erotic encounters and graphic descriptions of sexualized bodies.<sup>157</sup>

This is certainly possible; after all, seeing a noblewoman emerge from behind her curtains and shine a light upon herself would have been an exciting and sexually charged moment despite the state of her body. However, this analysis largely centers the male monk and his experience, treating the noblewoman as a pedagogical tool. Eubanks does guess at the noblewoman's thoughts, remarking that "the woman has chosen to emphasize disgust at her body's impurities over any sense of enjoyment in its erotic possibilities."<sup>158</sup> Yet I am unconvinced by the dichotomy that Eubanks draws here between the teaching of impurity as disempowerment and the enjoyment of sexuality as empowerment. I will return to this point momentarily as I seek to re-center our patroness.

What might Keisei's patron have gleaned from this story? Was it that, much like visual depictions of *fujōkan*, "Women...used [corpse illustrations] as a mode of repentance, as a way to understand the true nature of the female form and to atone for the sin of leading men astray"?<sup>159</sup> The idea is by no means untenable. After describing her body's many repugnant attributes, the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 102-103.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>159</sup> Rajyashree Pandey, "Desire and Disgust: Meditations on the Impure Body in Medieval Japanese Narratives," *Monumenta Nipponica* 60, no. 2 (2005), 203.

2:9 noblewoman says regretfully, “Even so, by employing various perfumes, I have somehow decorated that body and made it attractive to you!”<sup>160</sup> With this mournful observation, the noblewoman claims a degree of guilt for the monk’s feelings. She cries “incessantly” as she reveals her deteriorating body to him, and she informs him that she was “afraid to show him false colors”<sup>161</sup> Her tone, therefore, does indeed convey a degree of regret for having led “one close to the Buddhist path”<sup>162</sup> astray. We can see the conviction that it is women who cause defiling desires in men and who should take responsibility for that desire.

If we take the court woman as the story’s central character rather than the monk (which is not far-fetched given that Keisei’s patron would likely have identified more closely with the noblewoman due to their shared class background *and* sex), another image of her emerges. When presented with the possibility of a romantic liaison with the monk, this laywoman not only effectively rebuffs his advances, but also realizes impermanence. Despite not being a learned monastic or being taught on the page by another being, this noblewoman questions, investigates, and ascertains the nature of her body. She experiences religious awakening just as much as the monk, a simple fact that is often obscured in analyses of *fujōkan* narratives that focus exclusively on the male characters. There is some optimism here for the aristocratic female reader, as 2:9 becomes one of several Part 2 stories that depict women attaining awakening. Keisei does not temper her achievement by delivering any condescending platitudes along the lines of “even a *woman* can be saved”; we are instead left with the assessment that “truly this woman’s heart is magnificent and wise.”<sup>163</sup> Building on Eubanks’ theory on the destruction of the physical body

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<sup>160</sup> Minobe Shigekatsu and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 151.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

for the sake of the Dharma body, we can say that this woman comes to understand her own potential for housing the Buddhist law.<sup>164</sup>

In such a reading, the court lady of 2:9 can be seen as much as a teacher as a mere object of the monk's learning. This is not a story in which a man willingly undertakes the task of observing a passive, desirable woman. On the contrary, the woman takes decisive action to correct the monk. When she greets him, she explains that, "Because I feel this cannot be ignored, I have returned,"<sup>165</sup> and later also says, "To tell you this message in detail, [I returned] to the palace."<sup>166</sup> When she comes into the light to show her body, she demands of him, "How can you not hide your gaze from this?"<sup>167</sup> The monk does not merely observe the woman's degrading body, but also receives an extensive explanation of its nature from her. He even thanks her at the end of the anecdote, saying "I have met a dear friend and my heart is renewed."<sup>168</sup> In short, he may *learn*, but she *teaches*. 2:9 is not the only Part 2 story in which a woman demonstrates greater understanding of Buddhist teachings than a man, and in this case, that man is even specified to be a monastic.

I contend that this teaching aspect of the character is central to rethinking what lesson the patroness might have taken from the story as a whole. The noblewoman certainly has the power of sexual attraction over the monk at the beginning of the story, and it could be argued that her revelation of her own impurity undermines that power. At the same time, from the perspective of a woman invested in Buddhism and achieving salvation, perhaps this story presented a change in

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<sup>164</sup> Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body*, 102-103.

<sup>165</sup> Minobe and Keisei, *Kankyo no tomo*, 150.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

the nature of the woman's power rather than its destruction. The monk was only corrected through the noblewoman's efforts, after all. She has traded sexual power for religious power.

**A Sermon on Compassion, Reverence, and Humility: Story 2:10, A Certain Noblewoman  
Makes a Request of Shakyamuni Buddha**

In Story 2:10, our author finds an opportunity to lecture on compassion and religious reverence in a fashion tailored to his female audience. Keisei hears that an acquaintance of his is bedridden with sickness.<sup>169</sup> After waffling for several days because of a directional taboo, he finally visits and observes her weakened state.<sup>170</sup> Upon seeing that she has set up a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha nearby and placed string in the statue's hand, he asks in which Pure Land she wishes to be reborn.<sup>171</sup> He is surprised to learn that she has set her hopes on Ryōjusen, Shakyamuni's Pure Land, as this is "generally not one people wish for."<sup>172</sup> Keisei then launches into a lengthy sermon on Shakyamuni's great compassion and power, the debt all humans owe to this Buddha for taking on their sufferings, and the shame people bring on themselves by not properly venerating him.<sup>173</sup> The noblewoman's strivings are therefore quite just and a good example for the reader, Keisei declares.<sup>174</sup> He concludes by considering how even lowly creatures such as snakes and earthworms may once have been humans, and as such should be treated with compassion rather than disgust.<sup>175</sup>

2:10 is a definite outlier in the collection as a whole because of its format. While the following story, 2:11, also includes a much longer commentary section than most of the other

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 152-153.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 153-157.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

entries, 2:10's two paragraph story is utterly overshadowed by Keisei's sermon on Shakyamuni (which is four times as long). There is no doubt that Keisei respects his acquaintance and sees her as a good influence for the reader, saying, "Should we see the ways of this certain noblewoman and find them futile? My prayer is that the person who will look at these tracks turn her attention to and understand this warning."<sup>176</sup> Even so, his own stated reason for including the story is that "wanting to write about this Buddha, I am delighted to have somehow had an opportunity."<sup>177</sup> Perhaps at this late point in Part 2, having hopefully entertained his patroness with several stories, Keisei wanted to lean into his educational role.

Aside from general respect for Shakyamuni, Keisei also attempts to instill in his patroness' heart a deeper compassion for the lowly creatures of the world, and his strategy here is more clearly gendered. He reminds the reader that they have only been born as humans because of Shakyamuni's grace, and that the snakes and earthworms that are so detested may once have been human beings themselves. He describes how they may have had "eyebrows fine as willows"<sup>178</sup> and "perfume embarrassing the four directions,"<sup>179</sup> how they may have had lovers. In an even more explicit move, he calls upon the image of a Chinese beauty: "How splendid might the empress of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty have been to the people around her? After she died, she became a large snake and lamented her sins to the emperor."<sup>180</sup> Keisei is cautioning his reader against callousness towards animals and excessive confidence in one's beauty at the same time, and his lesson seems to be purposefully directed at a female audience. He admits that he also needs to remember that an earthworm might have once been someone

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 158.



close to him, so there is no obvious implication that coldness is a problem specific to women.<sup>181</sup> However, it is plausible that the patron's identity influenced Keisei's writing choices in this section.

**The Surpassing Power of Faith: Story 2:11, The Story of a Young Girl from Higashiyama  
who Attains Rebirth in the Pure Land**

Our final story returns us to multiple points addressed earlier, such as the ability of relatively uneducated women to surpass educated men, condescension towards the non-elite, and Keisei's efforts to prove his own merits. The servant of a holy man becomes deathly ill and devotes herself to the recitation of the *nenbutsu*.<sup>182</sup> One evening, she suddenly announces to the holy man that she is going to die at the hour of the tiger and requests that he watch over her until then.<sup>183</sup> The holy man expresses doubt that she could know the time of her death given how difficult it is for even experienced masters to accomplish this, but the young woman informs him that her fervent *nenbutsu* practice over the years allowed her a vision from Amida announcing when he would come for her.<sup>184</sup> Lo and behold, when the hour of the tiger arrives, the woman rises from her bed and says the *nenbutsu* ten more times, and then she passes away.<sup>185</sup> Keisei comments on how impressive it is that someone "of that social status" could focus on her practice so diligently, wondering if she had karmic ties with Amida from lifetimes past.<sup>186</sup> He makes a special request that she come to greet him into the Pure Land someday due to the karmic tie he is forging in writing her story.<sup>187</sup> He then reflects on his own practice and the foolishness

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 160.

of worldly desires.<sup>188</sup> Keisei ends the collection with a prayer, some performatively humble remarks about his writing, and a request that the patroness not show his work to others.<sup>189</sup>

In my analysis of 2:2, I argued that Keisei's last-minute diminution of the wise Muro lady was likely a result of her status as an *asobi* rather than her status as a woman. The girl from Higashiyama is the only other woman in part 2 that receives any condescension as an individual in Keisei's voice, although he is gentler here than in 2:2. He merely points out her lack of education by saying that the *nenbutsu* was "frankly... not a practice she knew intimately."<sup>190</sup> As with the Muro *asobi*, the minor slight is portrayed as a function of class:

People of that social status appear not to think much about the next world, but instead only the things directly facing them, their sorrows and joys; when [this is the case], to strive every day without being negligent was [the result of] karma not unique to this life! Truly I wonder if she long ago forged karmic ties to the people of King Mujōnen's country?<sup>191</sup>

Earlier on, the holy man who employs the girl is also said to think that her *nenbutsu* practice is "more moving than expected for one of her circumstances."<sup>192</sup> Other than the 2:1 nun, Keisei has not felt the need to remark upon *women's* awakening as uniquely surprising, but he has now highlighted the social status of two non-aristocratic characters as being daunting obstacles for them to overcome on their religious path.

The 2:2 Muro lady is not the only prior character to which the Higashiyama girl's story connects, however; despite her indisputable poverty, she also plays an instructive role similar to that of 2:8 Kenreimon'in and the 2:9 noblewoman. She does not quite lecture the man she is

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 160-162.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 158.

speaking with as they do, but she does prove him wrong with her undeniable spiritual abilities.

He asserts that one such as her could not know the hour of their own death:

When even those who wondrously perform ascetic practices cannot know the end [of their life] and are troubled by various things, I do not feel that [your receiving of] this gift is true. For what sort of reason do you say this?<sup>193</sup>

Her response that her fervent daily *nenbutsu* practice resulted in direct communication from Amida with this high-level information, as well as the subsequent proof when she enters the Pure Land at the predicted time, contradicts the hierarchies that the holy man seemed to believe in – monastic/lay, elite/commoner, possibly even man/woman. In this moment, she is presented as superior in faith to both the master himself and his fellow traditional practitioners. Additionally, unlike the 2:2 lady, her success is not attributed to anyone but herself. Her proximity to the holy man could have been treated as a factor, but we see no evidence that he has taught her or that he has had any impact whatsoever.

What does the placement of such a story at the end of the collection do for both the author and the reader? Keisei tells us that he wants to benefit from this girl's faith:

Now, when I hear the story of this poor [woman], I have a respectful request. My prayer is that she will search for the traces of my careless writing brush, and when my fleeting dream of my grass hermitage ceases and I say goodbye to the space between the pine doors, that she without fail return and invite me [into Amida's Pure Land] as a friend through our karmic tie.<sup>194</sup>

This is a noteworthy statement; although, as we have seen, Keisei has hoped that he might become more like the protagonists of his stories earlier on in the collection, the above prayer is the only time that he explicitly endeavors to establish any kind of direct bond or communication with a character. Perhaps her knowledge-granting vision, unique to her among all the part 2 protagonists, made her the most awe-inspiring in his mind and therefore deserving of both his

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 160.

reverence and a special place as the last story. For our patroness, reading the above prayer would further underscore the impressiveness of the Higashiyama girl as compared to the holy man. Even the man whom she has hired to create the collection sees this figure as being in a position to escort him to salvation. Whether she identified with the Higashiyama girl as a fellow woman or differentiated herself from the character based on social class, this story provides an optimistic view of the power of faith to elevate anyone.

We have now discussed the implications of the girl's vision and passing, but as seen in the summary, the story does not end there. Ironically enough, Keisei's closing sermon focuses on the usefulness of ascetic practices in calming the heart and admonishes those who are captivated by the world until "the twilight hour comes" and they are faced with the reality of impermanence.<sup>195</sup> It is somewhat jarring to finish the girl's tale and then be met with Keisei's self-aggrandizing representation of his own religious accomplishments. He may have felt a need to reassure his patroness that even though the Higashiyama girl's employer had been mistaken, ascetic practices were still beneficial, and the monastic community still deserved her reverence, attention, and financial support. As this is the end of the collection, he might also have chosen to conclude by restating his own qualifications. We saw in 2:1 that Keisei is equipped to handle courtly literature, but here we are given anecdotal evidence that he is diligent in his practice (no matter how humble he attempts to sound):

Even though I am not among the number of [great masters], I have established the pines and wind as friends, I have made the white clouds familiar things; there are times when, on nights when the wind blows through the green leaves, I stare at the unstained moon, and there are times when at dawn I listen to the cries of the wild monkeys. There are times when I listen at my window to the rain shower that passes by as if to ask a question, and there are times I make a friend of the story that roughly blows past the mountain peak; in from of my window I suppress my tears, and when I suppress my feelings

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 162.

[while] sitting on the floor, and when my heart somehow is soothed, that becomes my joy in this world.<sup>196</sup>

In this passage, Keisei is dedicated to his separation from the world and is sensitive to nature, both qualities that make him suited to the task he has been given. This and his closing prayer that the various Buddhas bestow their compassion upon all sentient beings serve to convince the reader that her funding and trust has been correctly placed and will ideally generate a good deal of merit.

### Conclusion

Having assessed all eleven stories, we can identify a few overarching patterns. While the women in these tales come from a wide variety of experiences, almost every one of them is shown to be a paragon of wisdom, dedication, and faith. Their potential for salvation, whether in this life or the next, is not denied to them as women. They are treated as important members of a larger Buddhist community (as nuns, teachers, devotees, and bodhisattvas) and are not universally subordinate to men in their identification with that community. This is not to say that Keisei's treatment of women is consistently positive or that there are no disparities between Part 2 and the male-centered Part 1. As discussed in the 2:1 and 2:3 sections, Part 1 has no counterpart to the 2:3 demon woman or to the assessment in 2:1 that "those who become women" are likely to become attached to many things on account of being women. However, when the scroll is looked at as a whole, we can see that the author does not take a definitively condemnatory or derisive stance, and this fact cannot be separated from his audience's identity.

In my section on the social context of *Kankyō no tomo*, I referred to the use of "relational agency" by Blair in the reading of prayers commissioned by a Heian noblewoman who is mostly

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 161.

known through her relationships to men. Blair defends her choice to examine materials not directly created by her subject as follows:

[Aristocrats'] clients, male and female retainers, and servants did their bidding – or in the absence of clear directives inferred what they felt that bidding would or should be...Reishi was thus situated as a leader within a network wherein action was neither limited to nor the prerogative of the individual.<sup>197</sup>

By the same reasoning, while Keisei was writing *Kankyo no tomo* at the behest of his noblewoman patroness, he was acting as her agent. In a real sense, the text is partially hers as its sponsor. Based on the analyses that I have conducted in this thesis it is my contention that *Kankyo no tomo* would not exist in the form that it does were it not for this aristocratic female figure's presence in Keisei's mind. The mere fact that an entire scroll is dedicated to women is remarkable enough. However, we have also seen that nearly every story results in some sort of positive ending for its female protagonist. We have seen that, much more often than not, Keisei avoids explicitly gendered language denigrating women, such as "jealousy" or "even though she is a woman." Keisei never contradicts the doctrine that women cannot become buddhas, but no references to the five hindrances or transformation into a man are ever made. We have also seen that he writes multiple female characters who express higher understanding of the Buddhist path than their male counterparts, even when those men are monks. While these patterns should not be seen as the direct will of the patroness, they can be read as reflecting her role as Keisei's employer and give us some window into the variety of religious ideas on women available to her.

Male monks were not the only actors in the Buddhist community of early medieval Japan, nor were they entirely autonomous actors. In order to look beyond them and see the wider community, it is necessary to expand our pool of sources outside the realm of doctrinal texts and commentaries. The search for more varied perspectives may not always lead us to texts written

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<sup>197</sup> Blair, "Ladylike Religion," 6.

by the women we are seeking, but these women were still important participants in the creation of religious works. This thesis has sought to show that assessing woman-commissioned materials like *Kankyo no tomo* not only gives us a frame for better understanding an individual work, but also provides a useful line of inquiry for finding less-heard voices.

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## Appendix: *Kankyo no tomo* Part 2 Translations

### 2:1 The Religious Awakening of a Nun in the Mountains of Tsu Province<sup>1</sup>

It is a time long ago, and within the mountains of Tsu Province, a nun lives in a shabby thatched hut. She abstains from the five grains, taking nuts from sawtooth oak trees and making them into food. She digs a pond by hand and puts [the nuts] in there, soaking them and so forth. Her face is gray and withering, and one cannot tell [if she is] attractive or ugly.

When a certain person, happening to meet her, says, “What are you doing, living out here?”, what she says is, “When I was at the peak of my years, I was left behind by my husband and once the forty-nine days of memorial services and such concluded, that very day I shaved my head and came to these mountains, and even now I have not gone to the village once. After [my husband] unexpectedly died, I thought ‘why should I interact with society?’ and became what I am now. I also had many children. Although I also owned many fields, thinking that all such things are merely companions within a dream, I discarded them.” She appears to be a person who, though she feels many things in her heart, does not put them into many words.

As for those who become women, whether they are of high or low rank, although their hearts are attached to a thousand things, their [wishes] simply cannot be fulfilled and they give up; therefore the heart that perceives [the truth of impermanence] must be quite profound!

We often hear of vows to remain together until death or to meet again in another life, but in truth such vows are deeply sinful.

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<sup>1</sup> Modern-day Ōsaka and Hyōgo Prefectures.

The emperor of China vowed, “If I am reborn in the sky, I shall become a bird sharing one wing [with my partner],”<sup>2</sup> and a woman of the Yamato islands lamented, “If [I am reborn in] a field, I shall become a quail and cry.”<sup>3</sup> Another person decided to leave behind [the words], “I want to see the color of tears of love,”<sup>4</sup> and another complained, “You, sleeping in a bed without me – that is truly sad!”<sup>5</sup> If we do not sincerely perform memorial services [for the dead], it is probably difficult for [them] to float [out of this world].

People dwell constantly [on love] for the whole length of their lives; they use Mt. Fuji’s flaming peak as an excuse [for their passions], expressing unendurable feelings, or they refer to the Kiyomi Barrier, soaking their sleeves in tears; then, they rise ephemerally with the smoke of Toribe field, futilely disappearing with the dew of Asajigahara – could they not suffer?<sup>6</sup> As for deeply compassionate people, depending on the situation and time, their sadness must be great! While the Prince in charge of court ceremonies was visiting the Fifth Princess, who never went [out of her home], he passed away; he wrote in the old hand upon a curtain cord from the place where she lived: “If I am someone you will not forget, look upon the mountain mists and long for me,”<sup>7</sup> and even when [this story] is conveyed to a lowly [person like] myself, the appearance of a spring dawn or mountain mist unexpectedly reminds me [of it]; this love from long ago is

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<sup>2</sup> Reference to Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685-762 CE) of the Tang Dynasty and his favored consort, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719-756 CE). The poem “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846 CE) includes a famous line in which the tragic lovers pledge to be reunited in the next life as birds that share a wing.

<sup>3</sup> Reference to a poem from *Ise Monogatari* 伊勢物語 story #123. A woman sends this poem to the male protagonist, who is considering ending his romantic relationship with her. He is so moved that he decides to continue the relationship.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to poem #536 in the *Goshūi Wakashū* 後拾遺和歌集, an imperial poetry collection completed in 1086. This particular poem is attributed to Empress Teishi 定子 (977-1001 CE), consort of Emperor Ichijō 一条 (r. 986-1011 CE).

<sup>5</sup> Reference to *Kokin Wakashū* 古今和歌集 poem #858, composed by an anonymous figure.

<sup>6</sup> The waves at the Kiyomi Barrier were used as an allusion to lovers’ tears. Cremations took place at Toribe field near Higashiyama. Pandey, “Women, Sexuality, and Enlightenment,” 336.

<sup>7</sup> *Kokinshū* poem #857, attributed to the Imperial Prince Atsuyoshi 敦慶 (887-930 CE), son of Emperor Uda 宇田 (r. 887-897 CE).

hard to forget, and when I wonder how much more so it would be within the heart of the Fifth Princess as she saw the drifting mist in the spring, I am moved. In another instance, referring to “Ura no Hamayū,” [someone unhappy with their lover] complained, “My resentment shall pile up,”<sup>8</sup> [and another] compared themselves to the ephemerality of the dew, saying, “If we could only meet...”; [these things] are indeed moving, and these people no doubt had a fate hard to bear! They are all at once fleeting and flagrantly disrespectful of the Buddhist precepts.

## 2:2 The Muro Lady is Abandoned by Akimoto and Experiences Awakening<sup>9</sup>

It is now a time not long ago: the Middle Counselor Akimoto loves an *asobi* from Muro, and just as things are going wonderfully – what can have happened? – his visits cease, and he sends her back to stay at Muro.<sup>10</sup>

This woman says to her mother, “Although I did not expect to return here, I thought, ‘How, while you are alive [could I not],’ so calmly, I have returned to my hometown. Although this is the case, I do not intend to behave as I did before. Understand that.” Saying this, she completely stops even going out, constantly cleanses her heart, and recites the *nenbutsu*! Her mother prohibits her [from doing this] for a while, but at any rate, after a while she says nothing. Some more time passes, and as the days go by, the house deteriorates. Even so, the woman notices nothing of the scenery around her.

Eventually, her mother becomes sick and dies. As each seven-day period piles up she is surprised by the sound of [temple] bells, and when [she realizes] that she cannot pay [the cost of

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<sup>8</sup> *Goshūishū* poem #886, attributed to a monk called Dōmyō 道命. The *hamayū* 浜木綿 tree’s leaves pile closely upon each other, leading to the poetic usage seen here. Pandey, “Women, Sexuality, and Enlightenment,” 337.

<sup>9</sup> Muro is a harbor in what is now southwestern Hyōgo Prefecture.

<sup>10</sup> Middle Counselor Akimoto 顯基 (1000-1047 CE) was the son of Minamoto no Toshikata 源俊賢 (960-1027 CE). He became a monk at age 37.

memorial services], she cries and cries, and does nothing else. Even the few people who have accompanied her make excuses about remaining clean, and scatter in who knows which direction.

Soon, it is the forty-eighth day. That evening, there is a boat stocked with many things. This woman, accompanied by one humble person, approaches this boat. The boat belongs to an underling of the Middle Counselor who has been in the countryside and presumably must be going back to the capital. Now then, the master of this boat is surprised; when he says, “This is the boat of such-and-such a person. How could I let you board? Do you know that?” she responds, “I do know. Why should that be a concern?” and climbs aboard. The following morning, he allows her to take fifty gold pieces. This woman says she will go home, saying that she will complete the memorial services for her mother today; she cuts her hair, and leaves [the world].

Now then, that day she does the Buddhist services, divides up her things, and finally takes the tonsure, closes herself off in a quiet place, and diligently performs ascetic practices.

Now then, the man from the boat returns to the capital, and when he tells these things to the Middle Counselor, the Counselor says, “As I expected, I saw her as a wise person, and she is even wiser [than I had thought]. It is a pity that you let her take so little. Give her a hundred gold pieces.” Saying this, he cries.

The fact that she became an *asobi* must be because of actions in her past life; no matter what, this is shameful, [but] the fact that [this woman] seems to have decided [her life] lacked meaning is [nonetheless] surely incomparable.

People who are abandoned by a lover are ever consumed by resentment and sin; the fact that [this woman] single-mindedly forgot her feelings and made them into an aid for her escape

from the floating world is [therefore] quite wonderful. People regarded as impressive have failed to cut off the resentment in their hearts and left behind fearsome reputations for themselves; the fact that [this woman] made [her experience] into a reason to leave the world is therefore especially incomparable.

Because the Middle Counselor is said in the *Ōjōden*<sup>11</sup> to be one who attained birth in the Pure Land, I would go so far as thinking that [the Middle Counselor] made [the woman] return home for the sake of bringing [impermanence] to her attention.

### 2:3 A Deeply Resentful Woman Becomes a Demon While Alive

This is a story from not long ago. I recall hearing it in Mino Province.<sup>12</sup> A man of no low standing [receives] some correspondence and goes to the daughter of a person in that province. Perhaps because lives at a great distance from Mino, his heart makes another romantic connection. Perhaps because she does not yet have a heart used to the ways of the world, the Mino woman feels resolutely bitter. Even at their rare chances to meet, she tries to scrutinize his heart in this bitter state, and the man becomes afraid.

Now then, when his visits completely cease, this woman will not eat anything; but because it is the beginning of the [new] year, in the uproar, no one notices that she has stopped eating.

Now then, she puts up a screen, and wraps herself up in her quilt, receiving sympathy from no one. Eventually, she takes some rice jelly from a nearby bucket, ties up her hair into five buns, like horns, wetting and drying them with this jelly. The people [around her] know nothing

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<sup>11</sup> Akimoto's story appears in the *Zoku Honchō Ōjōden* 続本朝往生伝, a collection of stories of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land in Japan that was compiled by Ōe no Masahira 大江匡衡 (952-1012 CE).

<sup>12</sup> Southern portion of modern-day Gifu Prefecture.

[of this]. Now then, wearing red trousers, she secretly runs away and disappears that night. Of this too, the people of the house know nothing. Now then, [thinking], “She has disappeared. Maybe on account of her unreasonable lover she has lost her sanity and thrown herself into a deep pool or river,” they investigate, but of course, there is nothing [to find].

Now then, time passes, the years and months piling up. Her father and mother pass away. It is widely said that for about thirty years, in a field in that same country, a demon has been living in a run-down temple hall; it takes the people raising horses and cows and eats them. Those who have seen it from a distance say, “It hides on the roof of the temple hall.” The country people meet to talk, and, saying things like, “Let’s try setting this temple hall on fire and burning it down. Then, we will gather and [re]build it. If we burned it with hearts intending to harm the Buddha, only then would it be a sin!”, they decide on a day, and come [to the temple hall] with bows strung and quivers tied tightly.

Now then, they set the fire and when [the temple hall] is halfway burned, running out from the roof comes something with five horns and a red skirt, bent at the waist, and terrifying beyond words. It is just as the people had thought; they draw their bows, [but] when they face [the demon], she says, “There is something brief I want to say. Please don’t lose control and make a mistake.” When they ask, “What are you?!” she replies, “I am the daughter of a certain person. With a remorseful heart, I did this and that and left [home]. I took that man and killed him, and after that, when I could not return to my original form, I was too ashamed [to go back to] the world; I had nowhere to go, so I hid in this temple hall. Because of the sad way of living beings, we cannot hide our desire for food. My deeds are all painful, and my suffering is hard to convey. Night and day, it feels as though my insides are burning, and my regrets and feelings of futility are boundless. My wish is that you gather together and sincerely write out the *Lotus*



*Sutra*<sup>13</sup> in one day and perform memorial services for me. Also, for people here who may have wives and children, tell them of this and tell them not to have a heart like mine.” Now then, crying incessantly, she jumps into the fire and burns to death.

While she is an unpleasant being, even so she is also pitiable. While her heart was irritated, due to just one moment’s obstructed thought, she will probably experience long torment; how regrettable and sad! That person’s direction [in the next life] will surely not be good. I do not remember if it was said that memorial services were done [for her].

## **2:4 A Sutra Recitation Service is Performed Using a Poor, Dead Woman’s Hair**

Recently, a person who has been an adopted daughter since infancy has been living east of the capital. Because she is of the Heike lineage, after the chaos of the Genpei Wars,<sup>14</sup> just to be able to live an ordinary life is a wonderful thing, and she passes through the world in an uninteresting fashion.

People have lamented reversals in the order of first and last since ancient times, [and here as well] this adopted daughter passes away before [her parents]. Soon after that, the adoptive mother also dies. In the early morning of the fifty-seventh day, the husband of this adopted daughter comes [to the house] and says, “If my wife of long ago were here, how many religious services would she have arranged? I intended to make an offering for one sutra recitation service by any means necessary, but no matter what I did I could not pay for it, and at my wit’s end, I

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<sup>13</sup> An extremely influential Mahayana sutra held to be the ultimate teaching of the Buddha in Keisei’s own Tendai tradition. A scene in which the Dragon King’s daughter becomes an awakened being is often cited and dissected in discussions of women’s salvation. The demon woman here wants to receive the merit generated from copying such a valued text.

<sup>14</sup> A war between the Taira 平 and Minamoto 源 families from 1180 to 1185. The Taira family to whom this adopted daughter belongs lost the war, while the leaders on the Minamoto side would go on to establish the Kamakura shogunate.

thought maybe this would do, so I have brought it here.” Saying this, he takes out something wrapped in paper, and cries loudly and incessantly. When the [biological] daughter of the [dead woman’s] adoptive parents, naturally wanting to know what it could be, pulls it open, it is the hair of the adopted daughter, which has been shaved and removed [from her head]. When she sees this, it is very painful and sad, and she cries without concealing [her feelings]. Even the familiar scent naturally makes them recall [the adopted daughter’s] face, and the two of them do naught else but cry. Now then, saying “Looking at this is of no use. Please hide it,” [the daughter] lowers her gaze.

### **2:5 The Story of a Woman Who Visits Hase Kannon Every Month**

A poor young woman lives in the east of the capital. Although she serves at the court, the time passes by without her meeting anyone who would support her. As time passes, every month she visits the Hase Kannon and laments her many troubles!<sup>15</sup>

In this way, three winters pass by, but there is no sign [from Kannon]. Still, the road is not easy, and her purse grows steadily thinner. Also, because of the ways of this world, people speak unkindly and bother her.

Now then, this woman thinks, “As things are, since I cannot even make preparations for the road, I will go on this journey and make my laments, and after this time I will quit going. What people say is true.” Just as she thinks such thoughts, she becomes sad and gloomy.

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<sup>15</sup> Hase Temple 長谷寺 in Nara Prefecture was a popular pilgrimage site among aristocrats, and aristocratic women in particular. The temple houses an eleven-faced Kannon image, the worship of which is believed to grant miracles. Pilgrims hoped to receive blessings and experience prophetic dreams pertaining to marriage and childbirth, as our current heroine does. Ambros, “Liminal Journeys,” 315 and 322.

Now then, she prepares her heart even more than usual and goes [to the temple]. As she thinks “This journey will be the end,” she pays attention to even the familiar trees and grasses, and her gloom knows no bounds.

Now then, that night, she lays down on her tear-soaked sleeves, and instead of taking a nap, falls asleep.

Now then, within a dream, a monk advanced in years and appearing quite virtuous comes to her and tells her: “I feel pity for you! Do not think resentfully [of me]! Quietly put on the thin silk robe of the court lady sleeping near you and quickly go home.” Waking up from the dream, the woman thinks, “What a deplorable action! In the end, my fortune is such that I will steal people’s belongings! Even if I take it, how far can I get with one robe?” While she thinks this, she decides, “Even so, there may have been a reason. I have truly entrusted myself [to Kannon] and come to visit, and so even if I am discovered and see shame, that will be in the Buddha’s service.” When she looks beside her, there truly is a sleeping court lady wearing a silk robe. When she quietly pulls it off and takes it, of course, because it is the Buddha’s plan, somehow no one notices.

Now then, taking [the robe] and wearing it, she quickly leaves. Her heart is pounding, and although she is quite upset and sad, she endures and gets as far as the Hase River. When she hears a loud voice behind her, she thinks, “Oh how sad. It’s just as I thought.” Thinking this, when she looks, they are not people who seem of low rank, as many of them appear to be coming towards her riding horses.

Now then, a man riding a horse says, “That woman appearing ahead of us is a court lady. Why is she traveling alone so late at night? [The fact that] she is wearing a silk robe [means that] she is a significant person! Ask her to stop. I will have her ride on my horse until dawn.”

Now then, when his companion man runs [to the lady] and tells her the reason, although she is very scared, she prays to the Buddha, she hesitantly agrees and climbs on [the horse]. The night glimmers [it starts to lighten], and around the point when people's faces become visible, when [the man] looks at this woman, [she looks like] the person he had loved deeply who suffered from illness and died, no different from dew. He is delighted and takes her with him [as his wife]. The man is from Mino Province, and is respected by many people! There is nothing that they lack.

Now then, the man thinks of the woman as peerlessly wonderful, and [the pair] spends years and months [together]. Some time passes, and this man, needing to go the capital, says, "If you are alone here, the months and days will feel empty. Is there no one close to you in the capital? Moreover, [if you stay here] like this you will have no direction and be gloomy, and you may feel anxious. How about you come with me and we make clear the state of things?" This woman, although she has not one person close to her [in the capital], all the same wonders how she could tell him the truth; she says, "I recall having just one older sister. I shall go to her," and they depart.

Now then, they go and enter the capital via Awataguchi.<sup>16</sup> Her heart is agitated, and sadly [she thinks], "I spoke baseless nonsense, and if this is realized, I [my future] will certainly become empty. Also, I fear the Buddha shining [down on me]. What possessed me to say such things?" They cross Third Avenue, and she says, "Wait a short while. I will ask after [my sister's] location around here." There is a decent-seeming house, and while it appears quite old, its gate can allow carriages and the like in; it is not terribly noisy and has an air of quietude. There, she dismounts her horse, enters, and looks [around], sees a girl, and when she asks, "Is the

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<sup>16</sup> A town in Higashiyama ward, which was historically outside of the official Kyoto city limits.

mistress/master here?”, [the girl] says “It looks like they are here. Please leave. I will relate [your presence to the mistress].” A woman of about forty who would clearly not be thought badly of enters from the wife door and asks, “Who is here?” This person says, “Although I have many concerns about telling you, these two or three years I have been in the countryside, but my husband came to the capital and said we should stay with someone close to me. How would it be if I say my older sister is here?” The mistress says, “I have no concerns. Tell [your husband] at once.”

Now then, they enter the house, and all the things that were prepared beforehand are brought to the house.

Now then, once arrangements have been made for [them] to settle down, when [the travelers] are called by the [person in the] house, they go [inside]. When the mistress asks, “Now then, how on earth did you come to be here?” and so forth, [the woman] tells her the truth from the beginning. Hearing this, this mistress cries heavily. When, thinking this strange, [the woman] asks, “Why [are you crying]?” the mistress says, “The one who lost their silk robe at Hase was I. With a very distressed heart, I went to Hase to honor Kannon’s vow, but nothing happened, and in addition, when I lost my robe, I felt bitter about people’s foolishness, and since then I have not made my way [to Hase]. Even my house, in accordance with the days has eroded, and when I lost even my husband, I had no idea [what to do]. On my own, when I knew there was no way I would make it, you have shone light upon my path by bringing various things, and although on one hand I feel this is your compassion, on the other hand I feel that these are the gifts of the Buddha, and anyway I am unable to stop my tears.” Hearing this, the woman cries without restraining her voice. The pair sobs, and there is no one to calm them.

Now then, [saying] “Unmistakably, this is [the result] of the past (karma). From now on, we shall be true siblings, different from the scattering dew,” and the like, they rely on each other closely. Also, because [the woman] relies upon the man (her husband), and because it would not be appropriate to deceive him, she lets him know the truth. The husband is very moved and feels that because it was the Buddha’s arrangement it is very profound indeed!

Truly, how moving are the depths of the Buddha’s blessings! Kannon’s compassion has no equal. I heard a story when I was in China about a stupid man who tried to read the *Lotus Sutra*, and when he could not, an incredibly beautiful woman came to him from who-knows-where, became his wife, and kindly taught him. He finished one section, and her form as Kannon was revealed, and she vanished. When we gratefully think of [Kannon’s] compassion like this, it reassures us in our restlessness. To think about how, in the evening of our lifetimes, she will carry us on a lotus pedestal with her deep blessings is very reassuring.

## **2:6 The Elder Brother of the Empress of China Becomes Poor and Takes Care of Others**

When I was in China, according to what people told me, long ago, there lived the older brother of this country’s empress. He suddenly runs away and goes here and there without deciding on a direction! Because of his poor and shabby appearance, people do not know his status. In distant places he is continuously harmed and in pain, and experiences only troubles.

His younger sister the Empress calls him home with great difficulty, and coaxes him in various ways, and when she says, “From now on you must remain here. I shall arrange the appropriate things,” he says, “I shall do that!” and remains [in the palace], but again he fools people and runs out. Because he does this time and again, the empress feels that [her hopes] are not being fulfilled, and sends an imperial order out to the provinces, declaring, “Regarding

humble and poor people who might be wandering about, you must invariably lend them lodging, provide them with food, and show them kindness!”

Now then, many poor people benefitted thanks to this one person, and experienced joys rather than troubles!

Now then, his picture is drawn on paper and, looking at him with deep respect, everyone owns [this picture]. Some said, “Ah, come around here and sell it! I shall buy one.” [He is depicted] in the form of a poor person, wearing a wooden hat on his head, holding a bamboo cane, and wearing straw sandals, of all things! He saw that at that time, there were many poor people in the world and they could not even request things [that they needed], and in order to help them, he wandered around [like them].

Indeed, his must have been a rare and compassionate heart. People’s ways are such that they intend to show compassion to poor people only after their own [life] has improved, [so] the fact that this person truly felt such deep compassion [on behalf of the poor] is quite sublime. I wonder which place he has been reborn in. He was truly beloved.

## **2:7 A Man from China Hears the Laments of His Cow and Horse and Experiences**

### **Religious Awakening**

When I was in China, according to what people told me, long ago, in this country there lived a person of no low status. His household is extremely wealthy. One autumn night, climbing a tall cherry tree, he stares at the moon; in that moment, the night has become quiet, the people are settled into sleep, and nothing is making any noise.

At about that moment, the horse and cow there [begin to] tell tales [to each other]! The horse says, “Oh, how sad. How painful. What kind of sin [did I commit] that my punishment is

to be used by this person (the man) all day long in this fashion, I wonder; Even at night when my heart must rest, I hurt from the cane, and it is awfully painful, and I cannot sleep. I wonder if he intends to use me in this way again the next day. When I think this, it is not easy to sleep.” The cow says, “Exactly! It is a pitiful and sad thing. Although I feel that I have earned this form, facing the situation, it is easy to feel the resentment of an ordinary person.”

When [the man] hears this, his heart is sad, and he says to his wife and daughter, “I intend to secretly leave this house tonight. This sort of thing has happened! [Referring to the conversation he has just heard.] In my current state, *this* sort of thing will certainly accumulate! Wealth is my enemy! I will throw away this house and go somewhere, to a place where there are no people and it is quiet, and I will think on the next life. As for you, you must stay here.” When he says this, the two of them say, “Who shall we rely upon, if we remain behind? We will follow you no matter where you shall go!” Saying “In that case, that is how it will be,” the family of three secretly leaves.

Now then, going far away, at the base of an unmemorable mountain, they set up a hermitage, make three bamboo baskets per day, and send the daughter out to sell them. As they live in the world in this fashion, one time, there is no one who buys the baskets. [The daughter] returns home empty-handed. Again, although she brings out the next day’s portion, on that day as well there is no one who buys [them]. Again with the next day’s portion, although she takes nine baskets with her, on this day as well there is no one who buys [them]. The daughter laments, “I have had nothing but this type of day [recently]. It must be difficult for my parents to continue living. What will I do?” Just as she worries [about this], one *kan* of coins has been dropped in the



road.<sup>17</sup> This daughter ties the baskets to the coins, counts the cost of the baskets, takes [that many] coins, and leaves the remaining coins and baskets in their original place.

Now then, when she tells [them about] this, her father is surprised and says, “What did you think to do, with the coins that you are holding? Perhaps it was the property of [the person’s] parents. Or perhaps it was the property of their master. Even if you were going to take it, you should have left behind and taken the price of *one* basket! What kind of person would buy nine baskets for just one person? I feel disgusted by the fact that you have this clouded of a heart. Quick, take all of the coins back, and come back with just the baskets.” This daughter goes and sees that the coin [string] is there just as before, and when she [replaces the coins she took and] takes the baskets back home, her father and mother are holding hands, their heads are hanging down, and they are dead. “Ah, what a sad thing! What am I doing living on?” Saying this, the daughter also lies down beside [her parents] and dies!

When I heard this [story], it was unbearably moving. Truly it is with that kind of heart that we should hope for the Buddha’s path, and although we follow the instructions of the path, our hearts are constantly clouded, and we commit the crime of scorning the Three Treasures. When I wonder how this is, it is sad and shameful.

I wonder what kind of bodhisattvas these three people from long ago are now, and in which Buddha’s land they reside. I pray within my heart, “My desire is that [they] please look upon my heart with pity and that my heart might be the same as theirs.”

In any case, I was told that the images of these people are now drawn and sold! Throughout all of China, [people feel that] this sort of thing shows wonderful compassion, even after [those three people] have passed away. In this country of Yamato, there is probably no one

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<sup>17</sup> A *kan* is a unit of measurement approximately equal to 8.3 pounds or 3.75 kilograms.

who would buy the images of such people. People who would try to draw and sell [those images] are also likely rare.

## **2:8 A Secret Imperial Visit to the Retreat of Lady Kenreimon'in**

In the spring of Bunji 2 (1186), [the Retired Emperor] thinks, “I wonder how [she] is doing now?” and makes a secret imperial visit to the home of Lady Kenreimon'in, who has thrown away the world and shut herself off.

When [the Retired Emperor] arrives, there is an old and very shabby-looking nun; when he asks her, “Where is the court lady?” she answers, “She went to the top of this mountain to pick flowers.” [The emperor] is very moved, says “While she says she has thrown away the world, how [could she do such a thing] herself?” and the nun says, “Having left home, how could she not do the appropriate ascetic practices? The enjoyment of Tōriten<sup>18</sup> for thousands of millions of years, the comfort of deep meditative concentration in Daibonten<sup>19</sup>; we cannot attain these things except for through the power of these practices. For those who would leave this floating world and wish to be reborn in the land of the Buddha, if we have thrown away [the world] how can we not do these things? It is precisely because of the lack of this kind of practice in her previous life that [Kenreimon'in] had such a bitter experience [in this one]!” [The Retired Emperor's] companions say to each other, “Her speech is more moving than her form!” and the Retired Emperor also feels moved.

Now then, when he looks around the Lady's dwelling, in one space an Amida Triad statue is standing, to which [the Lady] has been quite wonderfully offering flowers and incense. Another space appears to be the place where she sleeps, and there is a shabby robe, a paper robe,

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<sup>18</sup> The Sanskrit name for this heaven is Trayastrimsa, and it is located on Mt. Sumeru, the world's central mountain.

<sup>19</sup> Great Brahma or Mahabrahman Heaven.

and so forth. On the sliding door, the essential lines of sutras have been written. At the desk, it appears that she reads sutras. Writings that calm the heart, pictures of hell, and so forth are lined up in that manner. When [the Retired Emperor] looks at this, he is moved and saddened at the lack of resemblance to the treasures [she kept] near to herself in the past. Everyone thinks it is moving, some putting their faces into the sleeves of their everyday robes, some turning to face the wall, and everyone becomes silent; just then, two nuns come down from the mountain. One is holding a basket of flowers, and the other has gathered up twigs for firewood and is carrying them. When they look [at the nuns] drawing near, the one carrying flowers resembles the Lady. The one holding twigs had once been her close attendant. Everyone's tears flow, and they meet, astonished.

Now then, arriving from the nearby space and bringing her sleeves together, [the Lady] greets [the Retired Emperor] formally. [He] says various things such as "How much have you been harmed and reduced?" [She responds], "What [about my life] is poor and painful? It has been the wonderful cause of my coming to the Buddhist path! Always when I remember [the past], my tears will not cease. Leaving the flowering capital, when I looked back, I recalled my home; the smoke rose upwards, and even my direction was hidden by my tears, and I did not know which [things] were mountains or rivers. When we went to the village of Yashima,<sup>20</sup> [the people there] did not resemble the [the people wearing] noble robes whom I had seen before, and there was no one holding anything other than a bow and arrow. Now then, thinking that here as well we could not compete, we left Yashima, sailed the directionless sea, and were submerged in tears whether awake or asleep; at about that point, when some frightening men boarded our boat, my mother lifted the Emperor [in her arms] and jumped into the sea. [Other] people, one raising

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<sup>20</sup> A town located to the west of modern Takamatsu city, Kagawa Prefecture, which was an important naval battle site in the Genpei War. The Minamoto were victorious, and those Taira who survived the battle fled to Dan'noura.

up the imperial jewel, another carrying the imperial sword, floated in the sea, and they died loudly announcing that they would be [the Emperor's] companions. Those who remained lost their lives before my eyes, and some were tied up with ropes. There was not even the slightest compassion. At the time when [my mother] made to jump into the sea, she put some warming stones and inkstones and the like into the breast of her clothing, and taking the Emperor into her arms, she first made him pay reverence to the Ise Grand Shrine, and next to the four directions, and when I thought that I would also jump [into the sea], [she said], 'Since long ago women have not been killed [in this kind of situation]. Surely you must remain, no matter what happens, and pray for [our] happiness in the next world. The prayers of parents and children will certainly be granted. Who shall pray for the Emperor's next life, or mine?' At the time [this] happened, the Emperor had no idea [what was going on], and, seeing him with his hair parted in the middle and tied into buns, wearing his blue robe, my heart broke; I did not think I would possibly live until today. When, despite that, thinking that I should pray for the future lives [of my mother and the Emperor], I threw myself away, despising my life and praying, how could the many Buddhas and bodhisattvas not save me? Therefore, [had those events not occurred] I believe that there would have been nothing to lead me to the Buddhist path that I am now on!" *This* is what she says.

Now then, the night has grown late, and when the moon is about to set, they return home, [the Retired Emperor's] companions still soaked with tears.

This is recorded in the texts about this Retired Emperor. Somehow it is hard to ignore, so I [thought that I] should write them down.

## 2:9 A Court Woman of the Palace Shows Her Impure Form

Long ago, there is a certain monk, an exalted person, whose heart is moved by a court lady in the palace. Unable to bear his feelings, he makes advances, and when he reveals the depths of his heart, this woman, being undecided, says, “Why are you troubled in the meantime? When I intend to come back to the palace, I shall certainly notify you.” This person, although he had felt [just the] usual amount of love, [now] feels even more strongly than before.

Once some time passes, she tells him, “I will leave around this time. I will be here tonight.” [The monk] does what he must [to prepare] and departs. This person arrives, and the woman says, “Because I feel this cannot be ignored, I have returned. Truthfully, the condition of this body is putrid, and there is nothing one could compare it to. The inside of my head is full of brain tissue. Inside of my skin, meat and bones are wound. Throughout the whole [body], blood and pus flow, and there is not even one thing worth getting close to. Even so, by employing various perfumes, I have somehow decorated that body and made it attractive to you! If you were to see its true condition, you would certainly view it as unpleasant and frightening. To tell you this message in detail, [I returned] to the palace.” When she says, “Someone, bring a torch,” one comes out on a stand, burning quite red.

Now then, raising the curtain, she emerges, saying, “How can you not hide your gaze from this?” Her hair is frayed and standing up, and like some kind of demon, even her face which had been so elegant has become discolored, her legs and such have lost their color and are dirty, and her robes are splattered with blood here and there and smell truly awful. She comes out, crying incessantly, and says insistently, “If I were to stop my daily tidying methods and leave my body to its natural course, would not both my body and my clothes become like this? Because you are one close to the Buddhist Path, I was afraid to show you false colors, and so I

have dropped [those false colors] like this.” This person [the monk] has nothing to say. He cries incessantly, saying, “I have met a dear friend, and my heart is renewed,” hurrying to his carriage to return home.

Truly this woman’s heart is magnificent and wise.

Even in today’s world, although they may not be as frightening as this person, when people throw away [the everyday world], their bodies deteriorate! Seeing their reflections in water, they futilely end their lives; they wonder if they are now obsolete, and this is quite sad! When we look at the records of Ono no Komachi, even her form and her clothes shame the eye.<sup>21</sup> For those without lovely faces, entrusting [themselves] to the natural flow of things, why should they be different from this noblewoman’s false form? Our breath stops, our bodies grow cold, the nights pile up, and the days pass by. It should be said that our skin disintegrates, pus streams forth, muscles loosen, and flesh unravels. When we truly calm our hearts, we ought to peacefully think on this.

## **2:10 A Certain Noblewoman Makes a Request of Shakyamuni Buddha**

This is a story from not very long ago. Due to karmic ties, I know a certain noblewoman. One time, upon being informed that she is resting due to sickness, although I feel that this is boundlessly pitiable, I think it may be a bad time to drop by that place. There are directions that must be avoided, and I think it better not [to go], and hesitate, and the days become many.

Now then, I hear the news that it would not be difficult [to go], I go to visit [her], and she has weakened so much as to not seem like the person I remember! When I look to the west, on

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<sup>21</sup> Ono no Komachi 小野小町 (c. 825 – c. 900) was a famous poetess and beauty of the Heian period. Stories and artwork accumulated over the centuries after her death that depicted her decline in old age or her decomposing corpse.

the opposite side of the curtain, strings of five colors have been placed in the hand of [a statue of] Shakyamuni Buddha. When I say [to her], “Do I not also wish for the Buddha’s land in just this way? I wonder which Pure Land you have your heart set on,” she responds, “Because I have somehow grown used to praying this, I feel [I would like to] be born in the Pure Land of Ryōjusen.”<sup>22</sup>

When I try to think of it now, this Pure Land is generally not one people wish for. Even so, is there any buddha who does not bring humans closer to nobility? Even among them, one must speak of the original teacher Shakyamuni as awe-inspiring. Also, this land is, in the explanation of the great teacher of Tendai, said to be a true paradise.<sup>23</sup> Then again, it is known to be a land of coexistence [between humans and enlightened beings]; because it is a place with unenlightened beings, surely being born there is not difficult. Also, our India [of today] is [a place] overgrown with trees and grasses, and even if you go to today’s Ryōjusen and receive a shabby life, because it is written in the *Hōjū no Ki*<sup>24</sup> that “you will be blessed by the fifteenth of the sixteen arhats, Ajita, as well as his 1,500 follower arhats,” having been taught by them, we will quickly shift in our delusions, and will surely feel that we are facing towards enlightenment. When we begin to think on this, we should be especially grateful. For example, whichever Pure Land we wish for, because he was a great master for his whole lifetime, we must by all means honor this Buddha.

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<sup>22</sup> Vulture Peak, or Grdhrakuta in Sanskrit, was Shakyamuni’s retreat and preaching site.

<sup>23</sup> Keisei is referring to Zhiyi 智顓 (538 – 597), regarded as the first in the history of Chinese Buddhism to create a complete classification system of the Buddhist teachings. The text being referenced is the *Fahua Wenju* 法華文句 (*Hokke Mongu* in Japanese, *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*).

<sup>24</sup> Abbreviated title of the *Dai-Arakan Nandai Mittara Sho Setsu Hōjū Ki* 大阿羅漢難提蜜多羅所說法住記. It tells us that the arhats (Jp. *Arakan* 阿羅漢), or the disciples of the Buddha who had attained Nirvana, promised to uphold Shakyamuni’s teachings after his death.

When we calmly concentrate, the Original Teacher Shakyamuni descended to this corrupted world for the sake of inferior beings [like] us, expounded the Greater and Lesser teachings,<sup>25</sup> and even nowadays after his passing he pulls us [toward him], and with his various skillful words; when [he does this], just as we believe our hearts to have grappled with [his teaching], we wish for this or that Pure Land, and throw away his teachings; I wonder how it is that we do this?

When I dwell on this Shakyamuni's sublime rarity, I unthinkingly shed many tears! When we read the *Hikekyō*<sup>26</sup> and look into the details of his vow, he vowed, "I will show [myself] in various forms and teach with skillful words; if it is said that after their life has ended [any person] shall fall into the three evil paths, unable to be born into my land, I shall completely lose everything of the true Dharma that I have learned from long ago for the sake of enlightenment, and even the good merit that I have made shall all become unmade." He also vowed, "As for people who may commit the five wicked sins and by producing bad deeds fall into the hell of unending suffering, I shall change [places] with them and undergo [their] pain, cause them to be karmically linked to the many buddhas, and put them into the palace of Nirvana." Looking upon [these vows] with one's own eyes is extraordinary! After taking the Bodhisattva vow, this person sacrificed himself innumerable times, lost his life, and emptied his collected merit for the sake of us inferior beings; again, even to declare [this] is embarrassing.

How miserable! From our hearts, we do evil to ourselves, we inflict pain on the heart of the Great Sage Sublime World-Honored One, and that sin is difficult to even put into words. It is explained in the sutra, "From pacifying the people down to ruling the country, everything is

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<sup>25</sup> Also known as the Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) and Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) in the Mahayana tradition.

<sup>26</sup> The *Karuna Pundarika (Compassionate Lotus) Sutra*, which praises Shakyamuni's compassion.



distributed and crosses over [to us] from the Buddha's wisdom"; therefore, what sort of thing could be separated from the grace of the Buddha?

In some cases, we delight our own eyes with [our] reflections in the mirror, or in other cases, we love the pleasing form on the face of the water; isn't this all because Shakyamuni Buddha undergoes our pain in our place? Also, for example, from the advancing warrior quickly pulling out an arrow from his quiver, to the military man cutting off heads, waving his sword and spreading his name, [these people] must have floated up this time to [inhabit] human forms owing to Shakyamuni Buddha's power; if we think this, undeniably there is nothing separated from Shakyamuni's grace. If we first continue to think in this way, and sometimes offer up gratitude, we will then begin to know the Original Teacher's kindness.

When we continue to feel this way and live on within the world, should we look at the ways of this certain noblewoman and find them futile? My prayer is that the person who will look at these tracks turn her attention to and understand this warning.

[Knowing] thanks to whom we have floated forth and taken forms that recognize good and evil, how is it that we think [of him] lightly? To say nothing of the ancient virtuous priests of India and China who spread out the wind and lay down in the clouds and sent off the years without being polluted by the world's dust; how many more chances might they have had to know Shakyamuni Buddha? Although alone in a hermitage in the deep mountains the heart bends as easily as grass before the wind, if one somehow goes out and blends with the deplorable world, [the heart] is surely as difficult to quiet as the moon above the waves. Carefully suppressing the body and governing the heart, before we know it, we will certainly understand the Buddha.

Now then, I leave [the noblewoman's home] and all the while on the road, somehow, I recite only the name of this Buddha. Long ago, the Revered Mokuren<sup>27</sup> was in a faraway land and got lost on the road by which he meant to return, and when he recited the name of Shakyamuni, that voice was heard in the distant home of the Buddha; the Revered Anan<sup>28</sup> asked "Who is it that is reciting [the Buddha's] name?!", and the Buddha said, "Mokuren has lost his way on the road, and is praying to me."; thinking [of this event], would [my] voice now not also be heard in the skies of ever-present Ryōjusen? I feel in my heart that Anan's words and the Buddha's words would not differ from [those of] long ago and am reassured.

Now then, thinking [on this] seriously, I wonder if there was a time when the snakes in the grass feared by people were also humans like this. Their eyebrows fine as willows! Shaming the color of spring! Their perfume embarrassing the four directions! When there may have been people who regretted to part from them with the autumn breeze, it is a pity that we shabby [people] see them and are afraid and run away. Usually, people's hearts go whichever way, and there are times that they love [something] and times that they fear it! How splendid might the empress of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty<sup>29</sup> have been to the people around her? After she died she became a large snake and lamented her sins to the emperor.

I feel that from now on, I will not think of snakes like these and even earthworms as deplorable or separate them from myself. They may be my parents who have passed on from the world, or people close to us in a past life. Still more, then, the Buddha feels sorrow and pity for all of the myriad living beings just like they were his own children, and therefore if we were to

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<sup>27</sup> Called Maudgalyayana in Sanskrit, he was one of the Buddha's disciples and was known for his supernatural powers and filial piety.

<sup>28</sup> Ananda in Sanskrit, he was the cousin of the Buddha and was known for his incredible memory among the Buddha's disciples.

<sup>29</sup> Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (464–549) and his consort, Empress Wude 武德 (468-499).

think of [the snakes and earthworms] coldly, this would surely be a way to distance ourselves from the heart of the Buddha; I think these various things and the like.

In any case, wanting to write about this Buddha, I am delighted to have somehow had an opportunity.

## **2:11 The Story of a Young Girl from Higashiyama who Attains Rebirth in the Pure Land<sup>30</sup>**

This is a recent story. At the home of a holy man in Higashiyama, there is a poor and low-born woman about twenty-two or -three years old, who falls ill due to an epidemic and lies down [in bed]. She recites the *nenbutsu* without taking a break. Even the master thinks this is more moving [than expected for one of her] circumstances.

Now then, one evening, [the woman] says, “I shall die at the hour of the tiger.<sup>31</sup> Please watch over me without putting out the fire.” The master says, “When even those who wondrously perform ascetic practices cannot know the end [of their life] and are troubled by various things, I do not feel that [your receiving] this gift is true. For what sort of reason do you say this?” The woman says, “On your errands, I mingled in town, and going here and there, these seven or eight years I have never forgotten the 30,000 daily recitations of the *nenbutsu*. This was not especially for the sake of this world, [but] for the sake of mindfulness at the moment of death and rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land. Because of this, a splendid person came to me and told me, ‘I will come for you at the hour of the tiger! Do not be troubled.’”

Now then, the master of this house does not sleep. When he watches over [her], she counts the conch calls [for the hours] of the rat<sup>32</sup> and the ox<sup>33</sup>, and thinking that the time is right,

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<sup>30</sup> Higashiyama is a hilly area that stretches along the east side of Kyoto’s Kamo River.

<sup>31</sup> Between 3:00 and 5:00 AM.

<sup>32</sup> Between 11:00 PM and 1:00 AM.

<sup>33</sup> Between 1:00 and 3:00 AM.

she gets up, and raising her voice recites the *nenbutsu* about ten times, and her breathing stops. This is said to have been quite moving!

People of that social status appear not to think much about the next world, but instead only the things directly facing them, their sorrows and joys; when [this is the case], to strive every day without being negligent was [the result of] karma not unique to this life (across multiple lifetimes)! Truly I wonder if she long ago forged karmic ties to people like those of King Mujōnen's country?<sup>34</sup>

Although frankly [the *nenbutsu*] was not a practice she knew intimately, she thought of it as a companion, and when she was unsettled by things, she calmed her heart slightly by reciting only the name of this Buddha. Also, when she saw or heard something even a little pitiful or tragic, she would first recite only the name of this Buddha. Indeed, it appears that her vow to this Buddha from previous lives was deep. Therefore, it is [just] as the Great Teacher of Tendai explained, "There is a tie between Amida and all of the world's heinous living things."<sup>35</sup>

Now, when I hear the story of this poor [woman], I have a respectful request. My prayer is that she will search for the traces of my carelessly writing brush, and when my temporary dream of my grass hermitage ceases and I say goodbye to the space between the pine doors, that she without fail return and invite me [into Amida's Pure Land] as a friend through our karmic tie.

After all, when we even roughly investigate the biographies [of great masters], no matter which religious practices we perform, we will constantly calm our hearts and there will not be impurities. The wind blows, the waves rise, and we must produce thoughts of the Buddhist masters and constantly calm our hearts. Among them, many appear from long ago near the sea or

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<sup>34</sup> Mujōnen 無常念 was a king and one of the former lives of Amida Buddha. His story is included in the *Hikekyō*. His thousand children were also reborn as various Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

<sup>35</sup> Keisei is once again referring to Zhiyi, but the exact source is unknown.

in the fields, but [also] appear to live in dwellings in the deep mountains. That being the case, when we look into the traces of the prominent [masters] of India and China, many lived in dwellings in the deep mountains.

Even though I do not number among of these people, I have established the pines and wind as friends, I have made the white clouds familiar things; there are times when, on nights when the wind blows through the green leaves, I stare at the unstained moon, and there are times when at dawn I listen to the cries of the wild monkeys. There are times when I listen at my window to the rain shower that passes by as if to ask [a question], and there are times I make a friend of the storm that roughly blows past the mountain peak; in front of my window I suppress my tears, and when I suppress my feelings [while sitting] on the floor, and when my heart somehow is soothed, that becomes my joy in this world. Even supposing that we do not think of the next world, even if we might merely amuse our hearts in this lifetime, that is not a bad thing. Sitting by the sea, our heart is washed by the waves; hiding deep in a valley, our feelings are called by the wind in the pines on the peak, and even if we do not think of this as being for the sake of the next world, it surely calms the heart. Must it be said that to put our thoughts on the true path, distance ourselves from corrupted people, not [let] our hearts dwell within the floating world, and to live without being polluted by the dust of the world and so forth is surely not bad?

How miserable, that within this glimmering and sad world we are drowned in temporary names, we send off long nights bound by the falsity of sexual love, we spend the reward of [having observed] the five precepts long ago; [all of this] is quite sad. As such we sleep deeply in ignorance, and although we do not think that this world is splendid, we pass yesterday uselessly and today also hollowly grows dark. It is only when the twilight hour comes that, although the same temple bells ring, in the evening the sound is sad, and we are unable to stop our tears and

suddenly become enlightened. Ah, though we lament that we wish to remain in this kind of state with the Buddha's help, because our hearts are accustomed to passing through this world, continuing on is particularly difficult; living on this way is lamentable and foolish!

My prayer is that Shakyamuni Buddha, Amida Buddha, and all the buddhas of the four directions return to their vows of long ago and bestow compassion [on living beings].

In any case although I began writing these two scrolls, owing to the fact that my words are clumsy and my mind is small, I passed time pointlessly, and the days went by uselessly, and so I said that I would put away my inkstone in embarrassment; but because I was told a while ago that I should continue the anthology, without thinking of people's baseless rumors, I have taken up my brush again.

My wish is that the dignified reader before whom I offer this collection does not spread it beyond [her own] compassionate heart. I finished recording this in Jōkyū 4 (1222) in about the middle of the third month, in my grass hut of ten square feet among the peaks of Nishiyama.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mountain range that runs north-south along the west side of Kyoto.