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Women, Real and Imagined, In Asian Art
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TWILIGHT WORLD OF SCREENS? REALLY?

Women, Art, and Agency in Late Heian Japan

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A brief note on what to expect

For decades it has been a commonplace that the Buddhist art practices of the Kyoto elite in the 11th and 12th centuries were for the most part the preserve of a man's world of statesmanship, faith, and patronage. Among the most influential of such patrons were Fujiwara no Michinaga, his son Yorimichi, and their circle of gentlemen friends. A close look at primary records of the period, such as the diaries of Michinaga and his associates, tells a different story and allows another picture of their world to come into view. We see that, in that world, women of the Fujiwara and Minamoto houses—Fujiwara no Senshi (Akiko), Fujiwara no Shōshi (Akiko), Fujiwara no Kanshi (Hiroko), and Minamoto no Rinshi (Tomoko) in particular—were the equals of these men if not their superiors in Buddhist arts patronage of their day. In this lecture I provide evidence for this claim and then consider the role of modern analysis and interpretation of the *Tale of Genji*—a haunting story of love and loss written by Murasaki Shikibu during her years in service to Michinaga's daughter Shōshi—as having skewed and even obscured our picture of women at the Heian court. My hope is that, by drawing attention to the primary textual and visual records, and stepping away from generalizations about the lives of Heian women based on modern and often gendered commentary, we can break free of assertions that, compliant and servile, the Heian woman lived in what Ivan Morris once called “a twilight world of screens.” That Heian woman, it must be said, is not to be found in the actual historical and visual record, which delivers instead a woman of great vision and agency in the emergence of traditional Japanese culture, holding her own in a complex world of politics, and flourishing there.

Some background readings

Fukutō, Sanae, trans. Takeshi Watanabe, “From Female Sovereign to Mother of the Nation,” in Mikael Adolphson et al, ed. *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), pp. 15-34

McCullough, William H., “Japanese Marriage Institutions in the Heian Period,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 27 (1967), pp. 103-167

Morris, Ivan, *World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [originally published 1964]), pp. 199-250

Murasaki Shikibu, trans. Dennis Washburn, *Tale of Genji* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015)

Okada, H. Richard, *Figures of Resistance: Language, Poetry, and Narrating in The Tale of Genji and other Mid-Heian Texts* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 159-173

Ruppert, Brian, *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 192-229

Stavros, Matthew, *Kyoto: An Urban History of Japan's Premodern Capital* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), pp. 1-41

Yiengpruksawan, Mimi Hall, "The Phoenix Hall at Uji and the Symmetries of Replication," *The Art Bulletin* 77: 4 (December 1995), pp. 647-672

Prominent persons in Heian arts patronage

Royals

Princess Senshi (Senshi Naishinnō) 選子内親王 (964-1035)

Enyū (Morihiro) 円融天皇 (959-991, r. 969-984), husband of Fujiwara no Senshi

Ichijō (Yasuhito) 一条天皇 (980-1011; r. 986-1011), husband of Fujiwara no Shōshi

Go Ichijō (Atsuhira) 後一条天皇 (1008-1036, r. 1016-1036), son of Ichijō and Shōshi, husband of Fujiwara no Ishi

Go Suzaku (Atsunaga) 後朱雀天皇 (1009-1045, r. 1036-1045), son of Ichijō and Shōshi, husband of Fujiwara no Kishi

Go Reizei (Chikahito) 後冷泉天皇 (1025-1068, r. 1045-1058), son of Go Suzaku and Fujiwara no Kishi, husband of Fujiwara no Kanshi

Fujiwara and Minamoto Houses

Fujiwara no Senshi (Akiko) 藤原詮子 (962-1001), older sister of Michinaga, consort of Enyū, mother of Ichijō, known as Higashi Sanjōin

Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966-1027), husband of Minamoto no Rinshi

Minamoto no Rinshi (Tomoko) 源倫子 (964-1053), principal wife of Michinaga

Minamoto no Meishi (Akiko) 源明子 (d. 1049), second wife of Michinaga

Fujiwara no Yorimichi 藤原頼通 (992-1074), eldest son of Michinaga and Rinshi

Fujiwara no Shōshi (Akiko) 藤原彰子 (988-1074), eldest daughter of Michinaga and Rinshi, consort of Ichijō, known as Jōtōmon'in

Fujiwara no Ishi (Takeko) 藤原威子 (1000-1036), fourth daughter of Michinaga and Rinshi, consort of Go Ichijō

Fujiwara no Kishi (Yoshiko) 藤原嬉子 (1007-1025), sixth daughter of Michinaga and Rinshi, consort of Go Suzaku

Fujiwara no Kanshi (Hiroko) 藤原寛子 (1036-1127), daughter of Yorimichi, consort of Go Reizei

Fujiwara no Michitaka 藤原道隆 (953-995), older brother of Michinaga

Fujiwara no Teishi (Sadako) 藤原定子 (976-1000), eldest daughter of Michinaga's older brother Michitaka, consort of Ichijō

Minamoto no Masanobu 源雅信 (920-993), father of Minamoto no Rinshi

Fujiwara no Bokushi (Atsuko) 藤原穆子 (931-1016), mother of Minamoto no Rinshi

Minamoto no Takaakira 源高明 (914-983), father of Minamoto no Meishi

Fujiwara no Sanesuke 藤原実資 (957-1046), confidante of Michinaga and Yorimichi

Fujiwara no Yukinari 藤原行成 (972-1028), confidante of Michinaga