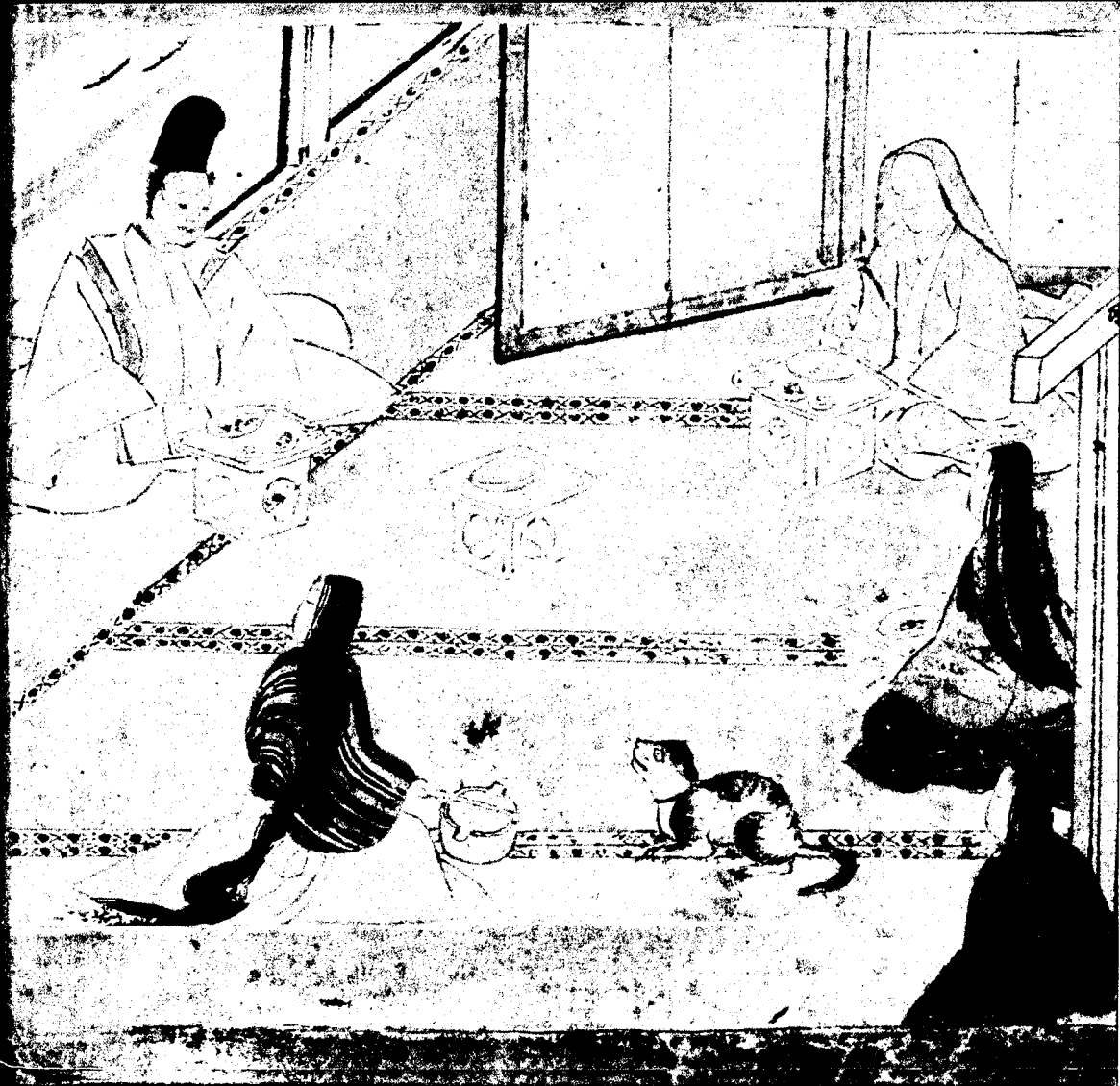


RAJYASHREE PANDEY

*Perfumed Sleeves  
and Tangled Hair*

*Body, Woman, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives*



*For Sanjay and Nishad*

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Some debts are hard to express let alone repay. Sanjay Seth has been at the receiving end of my enthusiasms and anxieties about the book on a virtually daily basis. His patience has been unflagging and his generosity boundless. He has read and reread the manuscript in its manifold iterations and brought to it his acute insights and criticisms. This book is for him and Nishad.

## *Introduction*

This book emerges out of a series of questions that began to trouble my reading of medieval Japanese texts. Increasingly, some of the conceptual vocabulary that had long served as my cultural compass began to feel inadequate to the task of guiding me through the world that I encountered in these works. What did it mean to interpret texts that belonged to a time and place far removed from my own through categories such as the body, sexuality, woman, and gender that were either wholly modern inventions or that had, in some way, come to be inflected with significations that belong to our own historical time? What was to be done about the anachronistic readings that sometimes resulted from such a transposition of categories, given that there could be no unmediated access to these distant and unfamiliar worlds? It seemed to me that the dogged empiricism that for the most part has dominated the discipline of medieval Japanese literary studies within which I was schooled left little room for reflecting on these questions.

What follows is a brief excursus into the ways in which my ideas shifted through the course of this intellectual journey; it also serves to explain why this book explicitly thematizes some of these reflections and seeks to revisit well-known texts from a new vantage point. When I first began to think of the centrality of the theme of amorous affairs and their consequences in a work such as the *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), I assumed that the body would be at the center of erotic and amorous desire. And yet, rather than en fleshed, corporeal beings, presented in their fullness, what I found instead were vaguely defined, elusive, shadowy figures, which hardly registered as bodies. Recognizing the presence of the body in a work such as the *Genji* required a reexamination of the assumptions that undergird our understanding of it as a category; it meant taking account of the fact that the body that we take to be universal was in fact a product of a particular history that belonged to the post-Renaissance West, and hence necessarily inadequate for making sense of the bodies that appeared in medieval Japanese texts.

Rethinking the body also called for a reconceptualization of the notion of desire. So ingrained was the idea of desire as a subjective, psychological state,

possessed by every individual, driven by hormones or the unconscious—take your pick—that it seemed natural, at first, to speak in terms of desiring subjects actively in search of objects.<sup>1</sup> And yet, what struck me as noteworthy in my readings of texts such as the *Genji* was not so much the presence of individuals as active agents, imbued with initiative and will and driven by desire, but rather the existence of a force field of erotic and affective sensations—the disposition of things, to borrow François Jullien’s evocative phrase<sup>2</sup>—which created a pleasurable ambience and generated in those who came under its spell a propensity, if you will, to react and respond. The ideal *irogonomi* (one who was fond of and receptive to amorous and erotic play) of medieval texts was best understood, I began to think, not as a Don Juan, in search of objects to satisfy an insatiable innate desire, but rather as one who, by displaying a heightened receptivity to situations, which had an erotic and affective potential, was ideally placed to fashion him/herself as an exemplar of the proper performance of courtly love.

The words *omoi* and *koi*, which appear frequently in Japanese poetry (*waka*) and romance narratives (*monogatari*) to signal the feelings of desire, love, and longing that followed fateful encounters, made no distinction between the physical and emotional aspects of love, for carnal desire and romantic love did not constitute two separate experiences; moreover, what mattered was not the individual as the bearer and generator of feelings but rather the ebbs and flows that shifted the movement of love and desire. Desire in Japanese texts, it seemed to me, needed to be disentangled from modern discourses of sexuality, which assume that it emanates from an individual subject, who is constituted through his/her sexual identity.

Thinking about courtly love in this way led me to reflect on the way in which the notion of desire (Sk. *rajas*, *kāma*; Jp. *yoku*) was understood in Buddhist discourse, where it was identified as the root cause of all suffering, producing a deluded sense of attachment to a world whose nature is essentially insubstantial and transient. Buddhist canonical texts provide an elaborate taxonomy of the five desires (*goyoku*), which are associated with the five senses (*gokon*), things seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. They often speak of sex as one of the most easily aroused of all desires. It is for this reason that the six sexual attractions (*rokuyoku*) arising from color, form, carriage, voice (or speech), softness (or smoothness), and features are to be especially resisted by those leading a monastic life.

Buddhist understandings of desire, at first glance, seemed closer to our modern conceptions of it in that they seemed to assume some notion of it as a natural predisposition, which makes some people particularly susceptible to its temptations. However, upon closer examination, it became apparent that different forms of desire in Buddhism were understood as products of the stimulation of the senses

from without, rather than as the workings of a natural, innate drive. Furthermore, sex, in this schema, far from being privileged as the master drive animating all aspects of human action, was only *one* among many other stimulants such as food, material wealth, sleep, and so on, all of which generated desires that could obstruct the path to enlightenment.

If desire and the body in Japanese texts appeared different from our commonly held conceptions of them, this did not mean that they were different in the same way in all the texts I encountered. A courtly tale of romance such as the *Genji* produced a different conception of love and desire from the one articulated in popular Buddhist tales, which sought to caution against the dangers of desire and deluded attachment. In contrast to courtly texts, where the body barely registered as a physical presence, it took an exaggerated form in the more popular tales of the time, where it became the site of laughter. The extraordinary heterogeneity of meanings that swirled around the body and desire even in works that were composed in the same historical period, and what is more, on occasion, even by the same author, pointed to the inadequacy of a reading practice that treated these terms as transparent reflections or representations of a “reality,” which lay outside them.

Konishi Jin’ichi’s conceptual framework, which distinguishes between literary texts that are high and refined (*ga*), as opposed to the low, unrefined, and mundane (*zoku*),<sup>3</sup> helped in part to account for the differences in the nature of the bodies and the forms of desire that were produced in medieval texts. Courtly prose narratives and poetry, for example, which were both composed, recited, and read by a small, aristocratic, and self-referential group that prided itself on its refined sensibilities, observed a certain decorum and restraint with regard to the quotidian functions of the body—no descriptions of sex or defecating, for example, appear in a text such as the *Genji*. There is only one scene in the whole tale where women are shown eating. The more popular tales in the *setsuwa* genre, on the other hand, ranged more widely from edifying tales of Buddhist salvation to entertaining and humorous stories about sex, food, and defecation.<sup>4</sup>

Useful as Konishi’s framework was for thinking about the ways in which aesthetic sensibilities and conventions came to be established, it did not account for the discernable differences among texts that belonged, say, to the same refined world of *ga*, when they addressed similar themes. Why was the language of love and sex in poetry written in Chinese (*kanbun*), for example, so different from the one found in *waka*, composed in the same period, even when both forms of writing belonged undoubtedly to the world of high culture? A consideration of genres proved to be productive for it allowed for a greater emphasis on formal codes and conventions, which, once established, circumscribed both the kinds of topics that

could be thematized as well as the language and style in which this could be done. Generic conventions were a useful way of thinking about the differences between poetry composed in *kanbun* as opposed to that composed in Japanese: while perfectly acceptable to speak about the pleasures attendant on sexual intercourse in the former, it would be unthinkable to do so in the latter.

Needless to say, genres did not function as watertight categories. Often, in many texts from the Japanese repertoire, what stood out more than the difference between genres were the ways in which they overlapped, and the degree to which each genre incorporated, reproduced, and transformed styles and meanings derived from other genres. Indeed, the very application of genre theory to Japanese classical and medieval texts with any rigidity was bound to be problematic, given that the genres that we use as taxonomical devices are, for the most part, nineteenth-century inventions, created in an attempt to find equivalent categories in Japanese writing to those that were supposed to exist in the West.<sup>5</sup> Genres then were useful only as provisional groupings of texts, which bore a family resemblance to one another, but which maintained wide kinship networks with other texts. It was by turning to this dialogic relationship between genres that it became possible to understand how diverse texts were linked with one another, and how a common repertoire of materials and meanings circulated from one discursive sphere to the next.

Notwithstanding the heterogeneous nature of texts that follow different generic conventions, these texts are bound together by a sense of a shared conceptual universe, which is shaped by the Buddhist epistemic framework that dominated the medieval age.<sup>6</sup> The writings that are the focus of this study span the periods from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. Following William LaFleur's expansive definition of the term "medieval" as signifying "that epoch during which the basic intellectual problems, the most authoritative texts and resources, and the central symbols were all Buddhist,"<sup>7</sup> I have chosen, as a heuristic device, to refer to works belonging to very different historical periods—from the Heian period classic the *Tale of Genji* to tales from the Muromachi age (*otogizōshi*)—as medieval. I do so on the grounds that, for all their differences, what gives these texts produced across different time frames a certain coherence is that none of the questions they raise, the issues they problematize, or the resolutions they offer can be properly understood outside of the Buddhist paradigm that frames the discursive possibilities available to them.

If Buddhism was indeed at the center of medieval hermeneutics, it raised another question about the problem of speaking of Buddhism and literature as if they were two distinct entities. For was there not a certain anachronism in assuming that the "religious" on the one hand and the "secular" on the other were natural

ways to separate human activity? The medieval age was one where engaging in worldly writing and following the Buddhist Way had not yet emerged as two entirely disconnected spheres of activity, and where it was perfectly possible for priests to be poets.

This did not mean, of course, that no distinction was made between the two. Often, texts engaged in a self-conscious thematization of the relationship between the two—the problem, for example, of how literary and artistic practices stood in relation to the Buddhist goals of detachment and renunciation was a recurring concern in many works across different generic boundaries. What engaged writers of the medieval period was not the question of whether they were related but rather how they were connected and intertwined, and what forms those connections could take. Irrespective of their particular orientation, medieval texts shared in the view that worldly activities (of which writing was one), far from belonging to an autonomous domain, were in some way integrally connected to the question of religious awakening and enlightenment.

Generic conventions mattered in that they created diverse possibilities for the ways in which these questions, themes, and ideas could be manipulated, but it was always within the parameters of a Buddhist worldview that the playing out of these possibilities occurred. While certain texts may strike us as more literary than others, how we draw the line between a literary and religious work in the context of the medieval period is perforce an exercise in arbitrariness. Scholars of literature (*kokubungakusha*) in Japan, who claim that Kamo no Chōmei was a litterateur par excellence, and Buddhist scholars (*bukkyōgakusha*), who argue the opposite, insisting that he was first and foremost an exemplary Buddhist, often fail to arrive at a common meeting ground precisely because academic disciplines have tended to create a sharp distinction between literature and Buddhism of a kind that would have been unrecognizable to medieval writers like Kamo no Chōmei himself.<sup>8</sup>

Thinking about the body, desire, and Buddhism, it became immediately apparent that it was not possible to consider these terms without addressing the "woman" question. Many of the contemporary debates around the construction of the body, gender, and sexuality have rightly identified "woman" as central to the ways in which these categories have come to be constituted. This is reflected in academic writing on medieval Japan, where there has been a growing interest in the role and status of women in Buddhism and in the ways in which their bodies and sex have contributed to their inferior status and to their denigration in medieval society.

In my own work, reflecting as it did some of these concerns, I saw little need to question or unpack "woman" itself, for the term seemed self-explanatory; medieval texts were self-evidently populated by people who were clearly identifiable

as either male or female. While granting that the category “woman” needed to be pluralized given the diverse range of female figures that appeared in medieval texts, that “woman” derived her meaning through her sexual and gendered differentiation from man was a “truth” that occasioned little reflection. And yet, increasingly this reading of “woman,” as constituted exclusively through her body and sexuality, came to feel like a distorting and debilitating constriction that foreclosed many of the questions that the rich and multivalent significations afforded to her in medieval texts appeared to raise.

Was sexual difference always the ground upon which the distinction between women and men rested, irrespective of time and place? Was woman necessarily a category produced in terms of a stark opposition and antagonism to man, or could the two be understood correlatively, as more fluid, complementary forces? Was it possible to speak of woman either as agent or victim in medieval texts without questioning what we mean by agency? How did the textual figure of woman, often mistakenly conflated with the “real” woman, function as a topos in classical and medieval texts, and what was the nature of the diverse significations that came to be assigned to her in different contexts? These were some of the questions that I sensed might prove useful for the line of inquiry I sought to follow. What was required, it seemed to me, was a new journey through the familiar terrain of medieval narratives, traversing a different path, which could generate new questions. Along the way, the very category “woman” began to lose its familiar bearings, and “man” and “woman” revealed themselves to be fluid and malleable, and hardly reducible to their biological differences.

While recognizing that categories such as the body, woman, sex, and desire do not necessarily resonate in the same way as they do for us in the texts that are the subject of this study, insofar as these categories form our grid of intelligibility and are born of our own historical conditions, they are, inescapably, the necessary starting point of our hermeneutic endeavors, for how can we find a neutral vantage point from which to gain access to the “true” meaning of texts far removed from our own times? In approaching Japanese medieval texts through concepts that are modern inventions, I hope, in a Gadamerian spirit, to follow a reading practice that stays open to the otherness of these distant texts and to the challenges they pose to the prejudices that inevitably guide the questions I ask of them. In so doing, the categories that inform this book, I suggest, will do double duty, by providing new insights into distant texts far removed from our own worlds, while at the same time pointing to the parochialism that is at the heart of our own thinking.

Chapter One explores the foundations of the categories body, woman, sex, and agency, which have become part of our analytical apparatus today, to demonstrate

that these terms were born of a specific history that belongs to Europe, and therefore that they are not amenable to being transposed unquestioningly to other lifeworlds that do not share the same history. I trace the genealogy of these terms to highlight how their meanings, even in the West, far from being fixed, underwent significant changes from the medieval to the post-Renaissance periods. Their status as categories of analysis has now become so thoroughly naturalized within academic discourse that often their historical contingency has tended to be obscured, such that they have universal purchase across the chasms of time and place. It is this claim to universality that I seek to challenge by considering what the body, woman, sex, and agency might mean in the context of medieval Japanese texts that were shaped by religious, philosophical, and medical traditions, whose core assumptions diverged significantly from those that obtained in the West.

The remainder of this book is an attempt to flesh out, through close textual readings, the claims that I make in the opening chapter. The weight of an extraordinary exegetical tradition notwithstanding, I have made so bold, despite being a nonspecialist in this field, as to start with two chapters on the *Tale of Genji*. This is because the *Genji*, it seems to me, is the perfect site for revisiting some of the assumptions about the body, desire, and love that have guided contemporary readings of this text. In the last few decades there has been a widening recognition of the importance of the body for an understanding of the workings of love and desire in the *Genji*. Often thematized under the appellation *shintairon* (debates on the body), this scholarship has contributed significantly to our understanding of how the body and the senses are engaged in the play of eroticism in the text.<sup>9</sup>

However, there has been little interrogation in these academic writings of the term *shintai* itself as a category of analysis. For *shintai*, a modern invention, is not a neutral concept but already carries assumptions about the body that derive from contemporary Western understandings of it. A reorientation whereby we shift our focus from *shintai* to *mi*, the term for body used in medieval texts, allows for an exploration of a radically different form of embodiment, which registers as an unfamiliar and virtually unrecognizable presence in the *Genji*.

If the body in the *Genji* is not given substance through flesh and bones, what are the attributes that endow it with beauty and ugliness, and how does it become the site of desire? What do we make of the centrality of clothes, hair, and calligraphy in the text, and how is the performative body linked to the ebb and flow of love and desire? My central argument in Chapter Two is that the body is most powerfully apprehended, not through a description of its individual attributes but rather through robes and hair, which are metonymically linked to the body and self, and imbued with both the material and psychic qualities that make for personhood. And furthermore, that it is not the body as an object but rather as a

phenomenological entity, engaged in performance, that registers most palpably as a presence, and that it is this body that has the power to evoke strong erotic and affective attachments.

Chapter Three explicitly revisits the interplay of the body and eroticism in the *Tale of Genji*, to argue that far from belonging to the realm of a pure aesthetics, untouched by questions of power and politics, the body and its performative modes are always imbricated in the complex hierarchies of gender and social rank, which are central to the text's construction of beauty and love. Erotic and affective intensities in the text are fuelled not by imagining relationships through the grid of equality and similitude but through differences of status and gender. At the same time, as I hope to demonstrate, neither status nor gender works as a stable and immutable category in the *Genji*; it is precisely this fluidity that makes it impossible to isolate either one as a causal explanation for the workings of power in the text. There are constant slippages and it is through an examination of the interplay of gender, social status, and bodily performance within specific erotic configurations that I seek to demonstrate how power works as a productive force both for generating and dampening affect and desire in the text.

Chapter Four turns specifically to the question of how to read "woman" in medieval texts. As I indicated earlier, it has now become almost de rigueur to talk about the fundamental misogyny of Buddhism and to suggest that the body and sexuality became the primary sites for discriminating against women in the medieval period. Focusing on the persona of one important figure, the Heian poet and lady-in-waiting Izumi Shikibu, I explore the creative reimaginings that were effected on the textual body of this famous literary figure in the narratives about her that proliferated in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods.

The object here is not to uncover the real Izumi Shikibu, an impossible task, but to explore the ways in which her life story came to be imagined in later ages to thematize major questions and debates that were central to the medieval age. It is my contention that the many imaginative fictions created around Izumi, and the failings and proscriptions enunciated under her name, served a larger end, namely to illuminate a set of questions regarding the nature of poetry, sexual attachment, and enlightenment, which were deemed to be of the utmost importance by medieval poets, priests, laymen, and nuns—men and women alike. Izumi Shikibu in medieval narratives is made to stand in for much more than solely "woman" and it is her role as a favored topos, incorporating questions to do with poetry, sex, and enlightenment that I seek to explore in this chapter.

The final chapter serves to challenge further the idea that medieval texts produced a unitary vision of women, and that Buddhism sought either to victimize or empower them. I do so by examining discursive formulations around one Bud-

dhist practice, *fujōkan*, or meditating on the foul and impure body. Here I seek to demonstrate how medieval texts weave together widely divergent readings of the topos of *fujō*, and by extension, of the body, woman, and desire. By focusing on the centrality of intertextual exchanges in the production of *fujō* in medieval texts, the chapter problematizes any straightforward distinction between "literary" and "Buddhist" perspectives on this theme.

In the *Genji*, for example, the experience of death and dying leads not to detachment and renunciation but rather, in line with the generic requirements of a romance narrative, a reworking of a Buddhist theme such that it produces instead a heightening of erotic and affective intensities. Two texts in the *setsuwa* genre, *Hosshinshū* (Collection of Tales of Religious Awakening) by Kamo no Chōmei, and *Kankyō no tomo* (Companion in Solitude) by Priest Keisei, which deal explicitly with the theme of *fujō*, at first glance qualify as straightforward "Buddhist" works, which seek to preach, through *fujō*, the truth about the impurity of the body. However, by following the protocols of *waka* and *monogatari*, these texts, I argue, offer readings of *fujō*, which are often at odds with those found in canonical Buddhist texts. By considering at some length how one Buddhist topos is transformed in different texts and contexts, I hope to reveal how the body, woman, attachment, and desire, far from being stable and unchanging, are in fact products of the intermingling of a variety of generic conventions and protocols.

The final short epilogue revisits the questions that are at the center of the book by asking what emendations we need to make to our categories in order to render texts from the medieval period intelligible to us. Drawing upon a small number of anomalous tales, which defy easy categorization, I bring them into conversation with the broader hermeneutical questions that have preoccupied scholars working in other times and cultures in a variety of disciplines. What does it mean, for example, that in many a medieval tale, sex is the preserve not only of humans, but that animals and vegetables too are also accorded a place in sexual intercourse? The alien and unsettling nature of these tales may serve to highlight the impossibility of subsuming the Japanese medieval world within our own.



## CHAPTER ONE

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

### Body

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

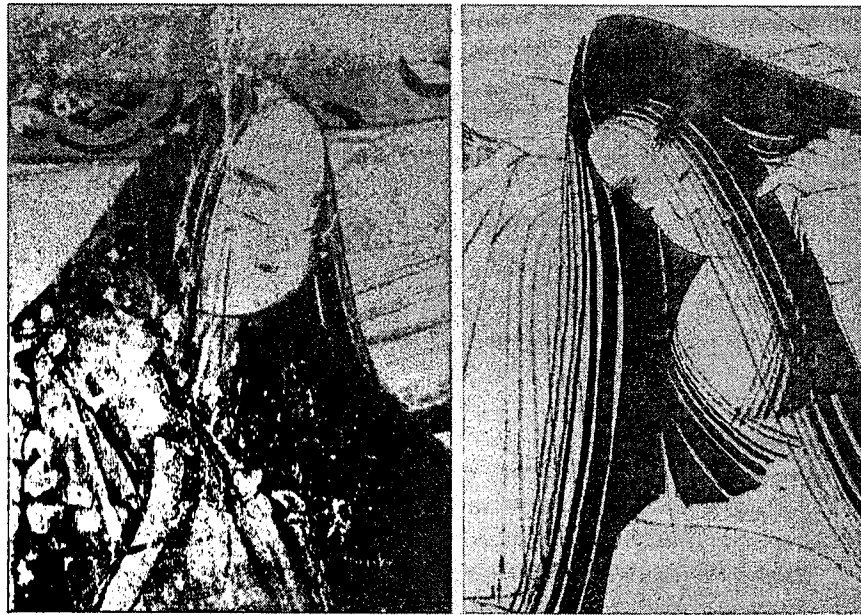


Figure 1. *Genji monogatari emaki* and *Makura no sōshi emaki* (Picture Scroll of the *Tale of Genji* and Picture Scroll of the *Pillow Book*), 12th century, Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya.

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

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

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

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

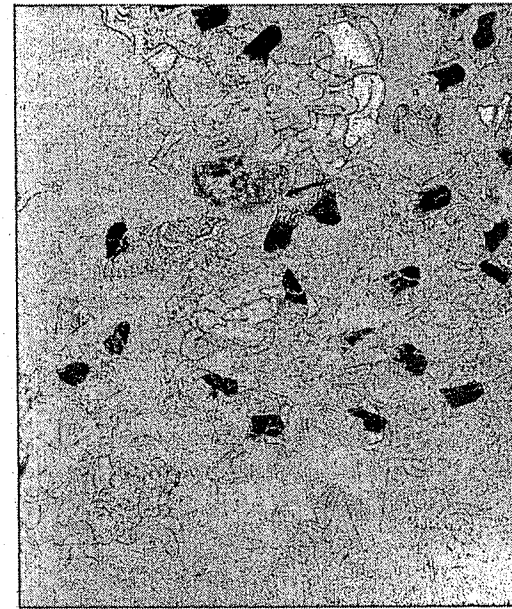


Figure 2. *Ban Dainagon emaki* (Picture Scroll of the Courtier Ban Dainagon), 12th century, Sakai Collection, Tokyo.

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

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



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

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

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

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

### Woman/Sex/Gender

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Women and Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

*mi* extends beyond the body to signify a self, understood not as an individual subject, or autonomous agent separate from society, but rather as one that is meaningful only as a social entity. It is for this reason that one of the most common usages of the term *mi* is to signify a person's status or standing in the world. We are far removed here from modern conceptions of the individual, as a lone figure, abstracted from society, and often in opposition to it. When medieval texts speak of *onna no mi* they mean more than the physical and sexed body that makes for womanhood; for both her mental and emotional attributes as well as her relationship to others as a social being are involved in the constitution of what we might call the female body/self.

The body in the medieval context was not something set in stone, where the distinction between man and woman was predetermined by their respective sexual characteristics; neither the body nor nature was seen as inert and passive matter with immutable attributes. This was of profound significance with far-reaching consequences, for it meant that medieval bodies were granted transformative powers that rendered the boundaries between gods, humans, and beasts porous and fluid. Both within canonical texts as well as in popular narratives, women and their bodies became shape-shifting forms that defied any consolidation of "woman" as a stable entity.

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Agency

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

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

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

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

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

The tradition of taking the tonsure is a case in point. In medieval times, both men and women, regardless of their status in society, or the circumstances that led to them taking religious vows, shared in the aspiration to become lay nuns or monks at some stage in life, in the hope of retiring from the world of social obligations and preparing for a favorable death. Furthermore, there were many forms that tonsure could take, requiring varying degrees of seclusion from the secular world. The category “nun,” for example, incorporated a wide variety of religious practices and living arrangements, ranging from women who continued to live within the household without taking part in sexual activities and procreation to those who lived in complete seclusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Erotics of the Body in the Tale of Genji*

... she was unusually small and pretty, and gave the impression of being nothing but robes (*hito yori ke ni chiisaku utsushige nite, tada on zo nomi aru kokochi su*) (Figure 4).

The amorous entanglements of Genji, the eponymous hero of the eleventh-century romance the *Tale of Genji*, the unforeseen consequences of love and attachment, and the workings of desire and longing in all their dimensions—their generation, fulfilment, and ultimate frustration—are at the heart of the thematic structure of this famous text. And yet, of the vast majority of men and women who generate and experience erotic and affective intensities, there are very few whom we can conjure up in their fullness, as people comprised of flesh and bone. For the most part they are fleeting, shadowy, and dispersed forms, which drift in and out of the text, not amenable to a sustained gaze.

We have come to accept as a commonplace that the body's physicality is somehow integral to the generation of erotic desire. Although we would readily grant that different cultures and historical moments privilege certain aspects of the body, be it the ankle, the nape of the neck, or the foot, we are accustomed to assuming that the physical attributes of the body are central to the language of erotics. And yet, we are hard pressed to find in either *monogatari* or *waka* a material body, made manifest through the fullness of the breast, the rosiness of the cheeks, or the shapeliness of the leg.<sup>1</sup> How do we account for this curious "absence" of many of the elements that make the body readily recognizable to us, particularly in a text that has at its very center the workings of love and desire? Some explanations come to mind, all of which, upon reflection, must be rejected.

There is the materialist argument, which would claim that there is nothing surprising about the fact that there are no descriptions of the body in Heian *monogatari* and *waka*, given that aristocratic women at court in that period were swathed in innumerable layers of clothing, and barely visible, as they reclined in dark rooms behind screens of state. Alternately, the absence of descriptions of the body and the sexual act in the *Genji* could be accounted for by the fact that the

to the moments when these categories are stretched, sometimes to the point where they cannot render us any intellectual service, for they fail to illuminate the past we seek to represent and understand. This does not mean that the romantic hermeneutic aspiration to “step into their shoes” is an option available to us either, for we cannot encounter different worlds other than through our time and in terms of our own categories of thought. It is in the space between these two problematic alternatives that we must shuttle, not disavowing our intellectual traditions but allowing the strangeness of other worlds to discomfit and unsettle our categories and provoke critical examination of them. The result may be a better understanding of worlds other than our own, as well as a better understanding of the capacities and the limits—including, perhaps, unsurpassable limits—of our modes of comprehension, and a recognition that we too, as much as them, are inescapably in and of our times.

## NOTES

### Introduction

1. James Schultz makes the same point in his critique of the anachronistic ascription in European medieval studies of modern conceptions of desire to twelfth-century German tales of courtly love. See Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 63–79.

2. François Jullien’s emphasis on the disposition of things, which produces particular effects in the world, is useful for thinking about desire and affect in ways that do not privilege human initiative and agency. Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Towards a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 260.

3. Konishi Jin’ichi, *A History of Japanese Literature, The Archaic and Ancient Ages*, vol. 1, trans. Aileen Gatten and Nicolas Teele (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 58–62.

4. The two worlds of *ga* and *zoku* were, of course, by no means mutually exclusive, and as Konishi argues, often a *ga-zoku* aesthetic prevailed, making possible the incorporation of both forms into a single text.

5. Classical works, which combined prose and poetry, often came to be categorized loosely, sometimes gaining the appellation *nikki* or *nikki* (journals or diaries), and at other times *uta monogatari* (poem tales) or simply *shū* (collections of poems). *Ise shū*, for example, has a significant prose narrative section but, as the name suggests, was thought of as a collection of poems until the late Edo period when it came to be referred to as *Ise nikki* (The Diary of Lady Ise). *Setsumuwa* did not exist as a genre until the Meiji period.

6. In using the word “episteme” in this context I do not mean to suggest that knowledge in the Buddhist world belonged solely to the realm of ideas, separate from material, embodied practices.

7. William LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 9.

8. For a discussion of how these two mutually exclusive fields of study emerged in Japan and how they shaped scholarship on Kamo no Chōmei, see Rajyashree Pandey, *Writing and Renunciation in Medieval Japan: The Works of the Poet-Priest Kamo no Chōmei* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998), 3–5. There is a much greater attempt in recent scholarship to bridge the divide between literary and Buddhist studies, but well-entrenched academic divides often militate against interdisciplinary conversations.

9. See, for example, the articles in Mitamura Masako, Kawazoe Fusae, and Matsui Kenji, eds., *Genji kenkyū*, 10 vols. (Tokyo: Kanrin shobō, 1996–2005).

### Chapter 1. Rethinking Body, Woman, Sex, and Agency in Medieval Japanese Narratives

1. It is not my intention here to provide a survey of the extensive literature that has burgeoned around the body, nor do I seek to offer a sustained analysis of the body's enmeshment in webs of discourse and power, and the medical, religious, and material practices within which bodies were produced in the context of medieval Japan, for that would require writing an altogether different book.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 131.

3. Some of the standard works of reference on the body in the Anglo-American academy are Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society* (Blackwell: Oxford University Press, 1984); Michael Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan Turner, eds., *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1991); and Chris Shilling, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (London: Sage, 2004). The growing importance of the study of the body as a separate field of inquiry is reflected in the continued popularity of the academic journal *Body and Society*, which was launched in 1995.

4. Caroline Bynum's work on Christianity in the medieval period, for example, offers a counternarrative to the characterization of all medieval Christian discourse as dualistic. She argues that far from despising the body and wishing to escape from it, Christian theologians in fact "assumed the flesh to be the instrument of salvation . . ." Medieval uses of gender categories, likewise, she suggests, were complex and took a number of different forms, and there is little evidence to suggest that medieval thinkers conceived of the body as matter or as female. Furthermore, medieval theorists who debated questions of eschatology did not privilege the soul and abandon the body but argued instead that at the end of time, the body we possess in this world would be resurrected along with the soul with which it would be united. Bynum, "Why all the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 251–255.

5. See Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 45–73, for a discussion of how Cartesian dualism marked a significant break from medieval understandings of self and the world.

6. For a bold argument about how the culture of dissection and the science of anatomy helped produce new conceptions of interiority and self, and how these pervaded every aspect of intellectual thought and artistic practices, uniting disparate figures such as Rembrandt, John Donne, and Descartes, see Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

7. Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2003), 11.

8. Foucault's challenge to the commonly held assumption that the body "obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history" comes from his examination of the multiplicity of regimes to which the body is subjected, such that "nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men." See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Sherry Simon and Donald F. Bouchard, eds., Donald F. Bouchard, trans., *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 153.

9. Indeed much of the new work being done on the body today brings together the disciplines of neuroscience and the humanities/social sciences, to overcome precisely the artificial separation between nature and culture that has shaped these disciplinary formations. Of particular interest in this regard is the work being done on affect and emotions, which explores the interplay of the biological basis of emotion with its cultural formation, treating the two as integrally linked, rather than casting them within the binary of nature versus culture. See, for example, Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002). For an overview of some of the major debates emerging in this new line of inquiry, as well as a comprehensive bibliography of work in this field, see Nicole Bustace, Eugine Lean, Julian Livingstone, Jan Plamper, William Reddy, and Barbara Rosenwein, "AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions," *American Historical Review* 117:5 (December 2012): 1487–1531.

10. When I speak of the "East Asian" tradition, I am referring here to the complex nexus of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian ideas that circulated in China, Korea, and Japan in the pre-modern period. In arguing that the "East Asian" tradition was different from the Western one, I wish to avoid any suggestion that the non-West occupies a position of radical alterity that renders it incommensurably different from and, by implication, wiser and superior to the West. Such idealizations would only serve to reproduce, through inversion, the oppositions familiar to us in Orientalist discourse.

11. Roger Ames, "The Meaning of the Body in Classical Chinese Philosophy," in Thomas P. Kasulis, Roger Ames, and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 168. As Ames argues, "Since body and mind were not regarded as different 'kinds' of existence in any essential way, they did not generate different sets of terminologies necessary to describe them. For this reason, the qualitative modifiers that we usually associate with matter do double duty in Chinese to characterize both the physical and the psychical." Ames, 163.

12. Thomas P. Kasulis, "The Body—Japanese Style," in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, 303.

13. Shigehisa Kuriyama, "The imagination of the body and the history of embodied experience: the case of Chinese views of the viscera," in *The Imagination of the Body and the History of Bodily Experience* (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2001), 18–19.

14. Mark Seldon, "Tales of Shen and Xin: Body-Person and Heart-Mind in China during the last 150 Years," in Michael Feher, with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, pt. 4 (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 267.

15. John Hay, "Is the Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 51.

16. *Ibid.*, 67.

17. John Rosenfeld, *Portraits of Chōgen: The Transformation of Buddhist Art in Early Medieval Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 147.

18. Willa Jane Tanabe, "The Persistence of Self as Body and Personality in Japanese Buddhist Art," in Roger Ames, Wimal Dissanayake, and Thomas Kasulis, eds., *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 406–420.

19. Sarah Horton, *Living Buddhist Statues in Early Medieval and Modern Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 1–2.

20. For a more detailed consideration of how the mind and body work together, see Thomas P. Kasulis, "The Body—Japanese Style," 299–319.

21. In Japanese Tendai and Shingon formulations, the body, always understood as a mind-body complex, became a particularly prized vehicle for the performance of rituals and practices that were seen as enactments and expressions of an already enlightened state. As William LaFleur puts it, “This ensconsing of truth in physical form was for Kūkai [the founder of the Shingon sect of Buddhism in Japan] never a move downward or an incarnation from some loftier, more spiritual, plane but a natural and in no way condescending articulation of the truth in the physical world. It was also a way of maintaining the radical nondualism of the Mahāyāna tradition; body and mind were not permitted to become separate or opposable realities.” LaFleur, *The Karma of Words*, 21–22.

22. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3–7.

23. In the medieval scientific tradition, “all human exudings—menstruation, sweating, lactation, emission of semen, etc.—were seen as bleedings; and all bleedings—lactation, menstruation, nosebleeds, hemorrhoidal bleeding, etc.—were taken to be analogous. Thus, it was not far-fetched for a medical writer to refer to a man menstruating or lactating, or to a woman emitting seed.” Caroline Bynum, “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in Michel Feher, with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, pt. 1 (New York: Zone Press, 1989), 185–187.

24. For a discussion of the one-sex model, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 19–20, 25–62, 63–113, 114–142, and 150–154.

25. As Laqueur puts it, “Nature [here] is not therefore to culture what sex is to gender, as in modern discussions.” See *Making Sex*, 29.

26. Kenan Malik argues that race discourse became particularly vocal in the nineteenth century, when science and evolutionary theory, in particular, were harnessed to support the idea of a natural order underlying social and economic inequalities. See his *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

27. See Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 149–150.

28. Joan Wallach Scott, “‘Gender’ A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in Joan Wallach Scott, ed., *Feminism and History, Oxford Readings in Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 156.

29. In her influential book on a feminist reading of Buddhism, Rita Gross defines her own project as a “feminist valorization of Buddhism.” The task of valorization, as she sees it, is to recognize that a religious tradition, however sexist or misogynistic, may not be “irreparably so” and hence can be returned to its “original state” before it became tainted by patriarchy. The search is thus on for a “usable past” in which stories from within Buddhism that have hitherto been sidelined or ignored in male-centered accounts are returned to the center and re-presented as viable models for the empowerment of women. Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 3–4.

30. See, for example, the following works: Michele Marra, “The Buddhist Mythmaking of Defilement: Sacred Courtesans of Medieval Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52:1 (1993): 49–65; Rajyashree Pandey, “Women, Sexuality and Enlightenment: *Kankyo no tomo*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 50:3 (Autumn 1995): 325–356; Terry Kawashima, *Writing Margins: The Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Barbara Ruch, ed., *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Pre-modern Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002); Ber-

nard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); Rajyashree Pandey, “Poetry, Sex and Salvation: The ‘Courtesan’ and the Noblewoman in Medieval Japanese Narratives,” *Japanese Studies* 24:1 (May 2004): 61–79; Janet Goodwin, *Selling Songs and Smiles: The Sex Trade in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007); and Keller R. Kimbrough, *Preachers, Poets, Women and the Way: Izumi Shikibu and the Buddhist Literature of Medieval Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2008).

31. For a useful survey of trends in the study of women’s history in Japan from the prewar to the present day, see Haruko Wakita, Ryūichi Narita, Anne Walthall, and Hitomi Tonomura, “Appendix: Past Developments and Future Issues in the Study of Women’s History in Japan: A Bibliographical Essay,” in Hitomi Tonomura, Anne Walthall, and Wakita Haruko, eds., *Women and Class in Japanese History* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1999), 299–313.

32. Denise Riley, for example, argues that “‘women’ is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of ‘women’ is not to be relied on; ‘women’ is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, ‘being a woman’ is also inconstant, and can’t provide an ontological foundation.” And lest we despair that the feminist cause is irrevocably lost if we jeopardize the stability of the category “women,” Riley insists upon its indeterminacy, arguing that “this instability has a historical foundation, and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability . . .” Denise Riley, *Am I that Name?: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 2–5. In a similar vein, when Joan Scott considers the status of “experience” in the practice of history writing, she argues that those who privilege experience as incontrovertible evidence “take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. . . . The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.” See Joan Wallach Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” in Gabrielle Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 202.

33. Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 52.

34. *Ibid.*, 7.

35. *Onna* often refers to a young woman. *Otoko*, like *onna* also often signifies a young man, or at any rate one who has yet to retire from the secular world. *Otoko* can also mean a manservant or attendant.

36. All references to *Genji monogatari* (hereafter referred to as *GM*), are based on the following text: Yanai Shigeshi, Murofushi Shinsuke, Ōaki Yūji, Suzuki Hideo, Fujii Sadakazu and Imanishi Yūichirō eds., *Genji monogatari*, Shin koten bungaku taikai, vols. 1–5, 4th ed. (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2001). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own. See *GM*, vol. 1, 329.

37. *GM*, vol. 4, 148.

38. For a comprehensive and authoritative account of the complex ways in which nature works as a metaphor in *waka*, and particularly in the ways in which animals and plants are associated with both particular seasons and genders, see Haruo Shirane, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press,

2012), 45–55. For a study of the many ways in which the trope of *ominaeshi* was used in *waka* poetry, and in particular its connections with the topos of “the five obstructions,” see Edward Kamens, “Dragon-Girl, Maidenflower, Buddha: The Transformation of a Waka Topos, ‘The Five Obstructions,’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 53:2 (1993): 389–442.

39. Tani Barlow makes the same point when she talks about the ways in which new conceptions of the modern Chinese woman entailed a reconfiguration of the category woman whereby, in line with the sexual discourses that emerged in the West, her identity came to be grounded in her sexuality. See her “Theorizing Women: Funü, Guoja, Jiating,” in Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 266.

40. Through a close textual reading of *waka* poetry, Michel Vieillard-Baron argues that it is the stance that the poet adopts in the composition, rather than his/her biological sex, that renders the work masculine or feminine. See his “Male? Female? Gender confusion in classical poetry (*waka*),” *Cipango—French Journal of Japanese Studies* 2, English selection (2013): 1–23.

41. The “five obstructions” (*itsutsu no sawari*) refer to the impossibility for women to attain rebirth as a Brahṃā, Indra, Māra, Cakravartin or Wheel-turning King, and, most significantly, Buddha.

42. That this association of woman with sex has become commonplace in interpretations of medieval poetry and literature in general is reflected in the translation by Helen McCullough of Ki no Tsurayuki’s description of Ono no Komachi’s poetry in the Japanese preface of *Kokinshū*. The original text says *tsuyokaranu wa onna no uta nareba narubeshi* (the fact that her poems are lacking in strength must be due to the fact that they are women’s poems). In Helen McCullough’s translation the weakness of her poem is attributed to her “sex.” There is little reason to assume that Tsurayuki attributes the weakness of Ono no Komachi’s poems to something inherent in the female condition that derives from her biologically determined sexual makeup. That poems written in the male as opposed to the female voice are different is not in question. My argument is that these differences are based on certain stylized poetic performances rather than on immutable sexual characteristics. Kojima Noriyuki, ed., *Kokin wakashū*, Shin nihon koten bungaku taikai, 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1989), 4. Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *Kokin Wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985), 7.

43. See Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sutra)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 201–202.

44. Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 56–63.

45. See Vanita Seth, “Difference with a Difference: Wild Men, Gods and Other Protagonists,” *Parallax*, 9:4 (2003): 75–87, for an analysis of the development of racialized understandings of the body in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which “Nature, be it the physical body or the physical environment, was no longer an agent with volition and intent, but a mute and passive object for study and classification” (85).

46. This is Thomas Laqueur’s description of the sexed body in the nineteenth century. Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 51.

47. Yoshida Kazuhiko argues that the principle of *modori* or “return” (used in Kabuki and Bunraku theater) in which, through a dramatic performance, a character’s true character is revealed after several twists and turns, is not dissimilar to the strategy used in the Devadatta

story to achieve its rhetorical effects. See his “The Enlightenment of the Dragon King’s Daughter in the Lotus Sutra,” in Ruch, *Engendering Faith*, 303.

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

49. Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sanjay Seth seek to inquire into the meanings and consequences of the fact that historiography cannot take seriously a world in which gods and spirits are treated as active agents, even where the human agents concerned attribute their actions to them. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 72–96. Seth, “Reason or Reasoning? Clio or Siva?” *Social Text* 78 (2004): 85–101.

50. I am drawing here on Saba Mahmood’s work on a women’s piety movement in contemporary Cairo, which offers particularly valuable theoretical insights into how we might think critically about women’s agency, oppression, and resistance. See her “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16:2 (May 2001): 202–236.

51. *Ibid.*, 206.

52. This is what Judith Butler seeks to do when she argues that power has to be understood not as something that dominates the subject but rather as something that brings the subject into being. Subjectivation for Butler is produced through performativity, that is to say, through the iteration of particular modes of conduct and bodily comportment that reinforce gender and other social norms. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220.

53. Both Tomiko Yoda and Thomas LaMarre make the same point about the limits of understanding agency through the liberal model of subjectivity. In talking about poetics in the Heian period, Thomas LaMarre argues that “it is not uncommon for scholars to treat poetics as the site of political contestation and to analyze poetic exchanges in which poets air their grievances in a competitive arena. Such competition is often construed by contemporary scholars as a form of resistance—usually to the ruling elite—and is interpreted in terms of the individual versus the group; in effect, they presume a modern apparatus of resistance.” He chooses to read poetic exchanges not “as a form of resistance but rather as a mode of participation in a poetic order of things.” See his *Uncovering Heian Japan: An Archaeology of Sensation and*

*Inscription* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 7. Yoda argues that “the *Genji* offers a highly intricate and multilayered portrayal of interpersonal conflicts—especially in what is expected to be among the most powerful forms of affective bonding—without constituting the agents who think and speak as autonomous, heroic, and psychological subjects” and that “the tensions and negotiations between lovers that the poetic dialogues articulate, in other words, cannot be understood through the modern binary between individualism and collectivism or resistance and conformism.” See her *Gender and National Literature: Heian Texts in the Construction of Japanese Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 145.

54. See Barbara Ruch, “The Other Side of Culture,” in Kozo Yamamura, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan: Medieval Japan*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 510.

55. See, for example, Ishida Mizumaro, “Bikuni kaidan: ama no tokui na seikaku,” in *Musashino joshi daigaku kiyō* 18 (1978): 1–15; Hosokawa Ryōichi, “Sairinji sōji to ama,” in Ōsumi Kazuo and Nishiguchi Junko, eds., *Shirizu josei to Bukkyō, Sukui to oshie*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1989), 143–151. Lori Meeks suggests that the multivalent significations attached to the act of becoming a nun defy a simple explanation of nunhood as synonymous with victimhood. See her “Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Life Cycle: Understanding Nunhood in Heian and Kamakura Japan,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 70:1 (June 2010): 1–59.

56. See Faure, *The Power of Denial*, 53.

57. As Christina Laffin argues in her study of the nun Abutsu, “Abutsu’s transitions between some form of tonsure to a return to sexual life show the fluidity of the categories of ‘lover,’ ‘nun,’ and ‘wife’ . . .” See her *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013), 83.

58. As Walter Johnson suggests, “the term ‘agency’ smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice . . .” See Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (2003): 115.

59. For a brief discussion of the many texts that proliferated around the question of the sinfulness of Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of Genji*, see Haruo Shirane, ed., *Envisioning the Tale of Genji: Media, Gender, and Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 17–19.

60. In an interview with Nicholas D. Kristof, Setouchi Harumi says that *Genji*’s liaisons were rape, not seductions. See Nicholas D. Kristof, “Kyoto Journal; The Nun’s Best Seller: 1,000-Year-Old Love Story,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1999. See also Komashaku Kimi, *Murasaki no messēji*, *Asahi Sensho* 422 (Tokyo: Asahi Shuppan, 1991).

61. More nuanced readings have attempted to restore something of the historical and cultural contexts within which women writers positioned themselves as narrating subjects in sexual encounters. See Royall Tyler, “Marriage, Rank and Rape in *The Tale of Genji*,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 7 (March 2000): 1–10, who argues that coercion was an acceptable strategy for men in a culture where to accede to men’s sexual advances too readily was frowned upon, and furthermore, that it was the initial coercive overture that ensured the long-term commitment and support of men within a polygamous world. Margaret H. Childs argues that vulnerability and passivity were regarded as highly valuable traits in women in the *Genji* because they served to enhance women’s appeal, arousing in men feelings of protectiveness and love. See Childs, “The Value of Vulnerability: Sexual Coercion and the Nature of Love in Japanese Court Literature,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58:4 (November 1999): 1059–1079. Hitomi Tonomura considers how Lady Nijō recasts her coercive sexual encounter with Go-Toba as something emblematic of her sexual allure that allows her to con-

struct a positive narrative of self. See her “Coercive Sex in the Medieval Japanese Court: Lady Nijō’s Memoir,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 61:3 (Autumn 2006): 283–338.

62. Kimura Saeko reviews feminist readings of the *Tale of Genji* to argue that reading *Genji* as a rapist muddles the distinction between literary narratives and reality and goes against the basic principles of literary analysis, and that such readings are an application of modern discourses of sexuality onto Heian texts. She suggests that greater reflection is required on the relationship between literary analysis and feminism. See her “*Genji monogatari to feminizumu*,” *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 73:5 (2008): 72–81.

## Chapter 2. The Erotics of the Body in the *Tale of Genji*

*Epigraph. GM*, vol. 3, 338.

1. As Robert Brower observes, Japanese court poetry is not interested in “either the identification of the people in love or a description of them.” It is unimaginable, he says, for a medieval European romance with “its interminable descriptions of the woman from top to toe.” See Robert Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), 452.

2. Daud Ali points out that embracing, kissing, scratching, biting, coitus, slapping, moaning, oral sex, and so on constituted the well-defined and elaborate rituals necessary for the production of desire, and the proper consummation of sex in *Kāmasutra* and classical Sanskrit poetry. See Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 213–214.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, Robert Hurley, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 35.

4. Speaking of French libertine literature of that period, for example, Peter Cryle writes, “The moral (or social) requirement that sexual scenes not be described in full, coexists, and often happily cohabits, with the pleasure of suggestive understatement.” See Peter Cryle, *The Telling of the Act: Sexuality as Narrative in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 184.

5. Paolo Santangelo makes much the same point about the Chinese attitude to love and desire. See “The language of body as repulsive/seductive language: the case of the literati in late Imperial China,” in Kuriyama Shigehisa, ed., *The Imagination of the Body and the History of Bodily Experience* (Kyoto: International Research Center of Japanese Studies, 2001), 60.

6. For a discussion of nudity as a form of clothing in Greek art, see Larissa Bonfante, “Nudity as Costume in Classical Art,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 93:4 (October 1989): 543–570.

7. John Berger sees the story of Adam and Eve as central to the creation of the concept of nakedness. Nakedness comes into being when the body becomes the object of the gaze of the other, and in European art, he argues, it is the figure of the nude woman that is singled out as the object of the male gaze. What is more, the nude woman so internalizes this gaze that she only recognizes herself as someone being viewed. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 45–64.

8. See Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), xi.

9. See Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 3–4.