VOICES FROM THE FEMININE MARGIN:
IZUMI SHIKIBU AND THE NUNS OF KUMANO
AND SEIGANJI

R. Keller Kimbrough

Introduction

In the history of Buddhism men have often looked upon women with suspicion, hostility and fear. Buddhist monks, sworn to celibacy, have sometimes projected a conflicting mixture of aversion and attraction onto women, resulting in women’s ostracization within Buddhist discourse and society. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Japanese Buddhist proverb, frequently cited in medieval Buddhist texts and regularly misattributed to the Kegon and Nirvana Sutras, which states: “Women are the servants of hell; they stamp out the seeds of the Buddha. On the outside they are as bodhisattvas, while on the inside they are as devils.”¹ This view of women as devils—dangerous mantraps in the lovely and alluring guise of bodhisattvas—stems from displaced male fear and desire, the irreconcilable emotions of men perceiving women as tantalizing threats to monastic celibacy.

The Buddhist marginalization of women was most concretely manifested in premodern Japan as the exclusion of women from des-
Ignated holy sites, a practice known as nyonin kinsēi, "prohibition of women." Nyōnin kinsēi exclusions seem to have become common in Japan from around the ninth century (Miyake 1990, 265a). They appear to have been enacted both in response to the imagined impurity of women and to the perceived threat that women posed to monks in their Buddhist practice. These exclusions later came to be supported by a body of tales, presumably spread by men, of women who suffered divine punishment for attempting to violate them. Despite the apparent efforts of some monks to frighten women into compliance with nyōnin kinsēi, Japan was home to thriving communities of nuns in the medieval period, and many seem to have resisted these exclusions by means of their own storytelling/proselytizing traditions. There are records from which it is possible to reconstruct portions of the oral repertoires of such groups of women proselytizer–entertainers as the Seiganji and Kumano bikuni (the nuns of Seiganji and Kumano), who seem to have been active in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods in disseminating stories of women—most notably the Heian poet Izumi Shikibu—challenging and sometimes overcoming the nyōnin kinsēi proscriptions set forth by men. The spread of these stories, a result of what might be described as a premodern, proto-feminist proselytizing tradition, was sure to have been empowering for women in Buddhism in medieval Japan.

Nyonin kinsēi and the Five Obstructions

At the heart of the traditional Buddhist antipathy toward women is the concept of the "Five Obstructions." According to the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the Five Obstructions constitutes a preclusion of women from five forms of rebirth: that of a Brahmapurāṇa God King, that of Śākra, that of Māra, that of a Wheel-turning King, and—most importantly—that of a Buddha (Takahusa 1924–32, 9:35c; Watson 1993, 188). As a result of this fifth and last preclusion, women are denied the prospect of attaining Buddhahood in their next birth simply because they are women. In his Fudōmyō yōgicle (Hokeyō yōge, dated 1127), Jiheian explains: "A Brahmapurāṇa King is pure, Śākra has few desires, Māra is steadfast, a Wheel King is benevolent, and a Buddha possesses myriad virtues. A woman, however, has many defilements, she has many desires, she is infirm, she is jealous, and she is rife with delusion" (Wan xucangjing 1977, 47:631).

In Japan, the Five Obstructions have often been equated with the concept of the "Three Obediences" (a woman's obligation to obey her father, her husband, and finally her son), and the two together—the Five Obstructions and the Three Obediences—are often cited in Japanese texts as a metaphor for women and the problems supposedly inherent to their gender. In describing the exclusion of women from Mt. Hiei, headquarters of the Japanese Tendai Buddhist sect, for example, Hōnen writes in his commentary Myōryūkyōshaku (ca. 1190):

The mountain peak of the Single Vehicle stands high; the clouds of the Five Obstructions do not gather. The valley of the Single Truth is deep; the waters of the Three Obediences do not flow there. (Ōhashi 1971, 55 and 247a)

The "Single Vehicle" is the Single Vehicle of the Dharma, and the "Single Truth" is the Single Truth of Buddhism. Hōnen opposes these to the Five Obstructions and the Three Obediences, emblematic of women.

Mt. Hiei was officially closed to women from the fourth month of 822, toward the end of Saichō's life, until an act of the Meiji government in 1872. In the Heian period, Mt. Hiei's nyōnin kinsēi was believed to have been enforced by the Sannō Gongen, the protective deity of Enryakuji Temple on the mountain. In a diary entry for the ninth day of the ninth month of 1020, for example, Minamoto Tsuneyori records the distress of the Enryakuji Temple monks at the deity's non-response to a recent female intrusion:

I climbed Mt. [Hiei]. People were saying that a crazy woman had ascended the mountain and had been walking the corridors of the Dharani Hall, and that the monks had tied her up and sent her down. The older monks lamented, "Since our mountain's founding there has never been anything like this that we've heard of. Years ago a woman lost her way and climbed up near the peak, and the sky began to crash with thunder and rain. The weather was unprecedented—it was the Sannō Deity reproaching the woman for her ascent. But this time there was no thunder and no rain. Are the Deity's miracles at an end?" That the
Deity did not reproach the woman is extraordinary. The holy mountain must be going to ruin.

Tameyori's and the monks' surprise at the Sanō Deity's inaction demonstrates a deep-seated and seemingly widespread belief in the divine enforcement of nyoin kinsei, even in cases of unintentional violations. The deity's disregard of the crazy woman in 1020 is the exception that proves the rule.

Later literature and folklore abound in tales of the failure of women to overcome nyoin kinsei. The folklorist Yanagita Kunio has documented numerous accounts of women—often miko and nuns—who were turned to stone for attempting to scale forbidden mountains (Yanagita 1916, 366–79). Mt. Ōmine in Nara Prefecture, Mt. Hakusan in Ishikawa Prefecture, and Mt. Tateyama in Toyama Prefecture all have boulders that are identified as the petrified remains of nuns who sought to violate the nyoin kinsei of those places (Miyamoto 1993, 622c–23b; Yanagita 1916, 371–74). Yanagita speculates that such accounts were circulated by men as a means of discouraging women from climbing mountains prohibited to them, and that the message that these stories must have conveyed to women in the medieval and early-modern periods—"stay out or else"—was sure to have been frighteningly clear.

Women were similarly prohibited from entering the precincts of Mt. Kōya, headquarters of the Japanese Shingon Buddhist sect, founded by Kūkai in the early years of the ninth century. A story of Kūkai's own mother's failure to ascend Mt. Kōya is contained in Karukaya, a medieval "sermon ballad," or sekkyō-bushi. The earliest surviving Karukaya sekkyō-bushi manuscript was printed in Kyōto in 1631, but as with all works of its genre, the tale predates its transcription. Muroki Yatarō argues that Karukaya's roots lie in the medieval storytelling traditions of the monks of Mt. Kōya, particularly the mendicant "Kōya hijin" (Muroki 1981 and 1984, 330–41 and 35–36). These Kōya hijiri likely circulated the story as a means of dissuading women from climbing Mt. Kōya.

According to an innkeeper's explanation in Karukaya, Mt. Kōya is a place from which all females—plant and animal alike—are strictly prohibited:

The mountain is a seven-league precinct of non-discriminatory self-practice, and thus while male trees grow on the mountain peak, female trees grow in the valley below. Male birds fly up at the ridge; female birds fly in the valley. Bucks graze on the mountainside; does graze in the valley. Trees, reeds, grasses, fowl, and beasts—all that are male may enter, and all that are female may not. Absolutely no women are allowed. (Muroki 1977, 43)

Mt. Kōya's nyoin kinsei is represented as a kind of natural law, a rule of nature beyond the powers of ordinary men and women to dispute or overcome. Even plants and animals adhere to its intent.

The Karukaya innkeeper explains that in spite of the nyoin kinsei prohibition, Kūkai's eighty-three-year-old mother once decided to visit her son on Mt. Kōya. Because she was a woman, the ground shook and lightning struck as she climbed. Kūkai came down to greet her, and explaining that positively no women are allowed—neither human, bird nor beast—he asked her to turn back. She refused. The innkeeper relates:

Kūkai took off his seven-paneled surplice—his kesa—and spread it over a rock. "Step over this," he said. As the kesa was her son's, the woman was unconcerned. She boldly stepped across, whereupon the blood of her monthly obstruction began to fall in tiny drops. It had ceased when she was forty-one, but now, at the age of eighty-three, it began anew. The kesa burst into flame and flew up into the sky. (Muroki 1977, 54)

Miraculously, Kūkai's eighty-three-year-old mother begins to menstruate. The kesa explodes in flames and flies up to the heavens, presumably carrying the old woman with it. 8

In medieval Buddhist literature, menstruation is often equated with the problems and spiritual defects associated with women.9 The most frequently used term for menstruation, "tsuki no samari," "monthly obstruction," is itself reminiscent of the phrase "Five Obstructions," "itsuisu no sawari," and the former is commonly associated with the latter. One point of the Karukaya story of Kūkai's mother seems to be that although the menopausal old woman has shed the outward signs of her female impurity, when she steps over her son's kesa, an act symbolic of her violation of Mt. Kōya's nyoin kinsei, her true nature is revealed. Her "monthly obstruction" begins to flow as a physical reminder that she and all women—young and
old alike—face the karmic obstructions of their gender. For the innkeeper and for medieval sekkyō-bushi audiences, the moral of the story was surely that the forces of nature permit no woman, not even Kūkai’s mother, from climbing the mountain. If the monks of Mt. Köya were indeed responsible for circulating this account, then it should be understood as a kind of male monastic propaganda intended to keep women at bay.

Izumi Shikibu and the Nuns of Seiganji

In 1488, a Tendai monk by the name of Eikai compiled the Lotus Sutra commentary Ichijō shūgyokushō.10 Ichijō shūgyokushō is one of several fifteenth- and sixteenth-century jikidan-type sutra commentaries, so named for their self-stated aims of explaining the Lotus Sutra in a clear, straightforward manner, eschewing difficult, complex or overly abstract discussions in favor of concrete examples from the everyday realms of lay and monastic society (Hirota 1993, 153-54). As a means of illustrating or explaining passages and ideas from the Lotus Sutra, Eikai cites numerous Japanese poems, including one supposedly written by Izumi Shikibu when she encountered a priest carrying an ominaeshi, a “maidenflower,” for the nenbutsu altar on Mt. Hiei. The earliest known citation of the poem (in a slightly alternate form) is in the poetic anthology Shinsenzai makushū, compiled by Nijō Tamesada in 1359, some three hundred years after Izumi Shikibu’s death.11 For this reason, the verse is almost surely apocryphal.

In the poem, Izumi Shikibu expresses envy of the so-called “maidenflower” that climbs the mountain while she—because of Mt. Hiei’s nyomin kinsei—cannot. Eikai cites the poem in conjunction with his explanation of the Three Obediences:

As for the Three Obediences, the first is a young woman’s duty to her parents, the second is a grown woman’s duty to her husband, and the third is an old woman’s duty to her children. This is explained in the Agongyō [sutras].12

Regarding this: At a time when Izumi Shikibu had taken holy vows and become a nun at Seiganji Temple, she once saw a mountain priest climbing [Mt. Hiei]

with a maidenflower for the nenbutsu altar. It was toward the eighth month. She composed a poem:

> na ni shi owaba
> itsutsu no sawari
> arubeki ni
> urayamashiku mo
> noboru hana kana

Though by its name
it ought to face
the Five Obstructions,
this flower yet ascends the mount.
How enviable indeed!13

Izumi Shikibu is herself precluded from visiting the Enryakuji Temple complex on Mt. Hiei, so she affixes her poem—a kind of devotional offering—to the stem of the priest’s ominaeshi instead. By having the maidenflower deliver the poem for her, Izumi Shikibu seemingly circumvents the nyomin kinsei exclusion. However, given that the poem calls attention to Izumi Shikibu’s unhappiness at the institutional prohibition of women from Mt. Hiei, it also serves as a kind of protest-message. Sending it up with her silent sister, the maidenflower, to decorate the altar of the Enryakuji Temple nenbutsu hall, Izumi Shikibu lodges her complaint with the very Buddhas and deities of the mountain itself.

Eikai’s renditions of both the poem and its headnote differ from those in Shinsenzai makushū, indicating that Eikai probably drew his story from some source other than Nijō Tamesada’s anthology. An abbreviated version of the poem-story is also contained in Sonsjun’s Lotus Sutra commentary Hokekyō jurin shūgyōshō (ca. 1512), which cites it in conjunction with an explanation of the Five Obstructions (Hokekyō jurin shūgyōshō 1991, 3.294). Many of the stories in the Lotus Sutra commentaries were drawn from oral accounts circulating in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Tendai dangoisho (“seminaries” or “instructional centers” for the training of Tendai monks). Eikai and Sonsjun were affiliated with different dangoisho, and their use of different versions of the “maidenflower” poem-story in separate but related contexts (the Three Obediences vs. the Five Obstructions) suggests that it, too, was drawn from a medieval Tendai oral tradition.

What is perhaps most intriguing about the Ichijō shūgyokushō account is the statement that Izumi Shikibu encountered the monk at a time after she had become a nun at Seiganji, a prominent Pure Land temple in Kyoto.14 There is no reliable evidence that Izumi Shikibu ever became a Seiganji bikuni, but various Seiganji sources make it clear that Seiganji chose to identify itself with her from as
Account of Izumi Shikibu’s Rebirth in Pure Land) reveals that the
Izumi Shikibu / Shōkū Shōnin account (as well as an unrelated Sei
Shōnagon story) was put to use in promoting Seiganji from as early
as the 13th century.18 Izumi Shikibu ōjō no koto comprises a single
handwritten masugatahon, a small square booklet of a kind carried
by itinerant monks and nuns as they preached. Considering its
content, format and related sources, it appears to be the text of a
Seiganji sermon. The work begins:

Izumi Shikibu was a daughter of Echizen Govern-
or [Oe] Masamune during the reign of Emperor Ichijō. She had mastered the styles of Japanese
[poetry] and earned a reputation as an amorous
woman, and her mind was turned only toward spring
blossoms, autumn leaves, misguided thoughts and
frivolous conversations. Through moonlit evenings
and snowy mornings, she passed her days in the
unending cycle of birth and death.

In time she reached the age of fifty, and regretting
the misdeeds of her past, she set out for Mt. Shosha
to see Shōkū Shōnin and confess her transgressions.
Shōkū Shōnin knew of this in advance. “Today at noon
eight demons will come,” he told the monks of his
temple. “You should tell them all I’ve gone away, and
explain [to them] how women are sinful devils.”19

Now at noon of that day eight women arrived,
including Izumi Shikibu. “I have come to see the
Master to learn how to leave this illusory world
behind,” she said, facing the monks.

The monks lie as their master has instructed them to, and they
ask Izumi Shikibu to leave. The nō play “Izumi Shikibu” explains
that Enkyōji has a nyōnin kiseri rule forbidding entrance to women
after dark, and in the play, the disciples tell Izumi Shikibu to go away
and come back in the morning.20 According to a late-sixteenth-
century telling of the story in Rakuyō Seiganji engi (A History of
Seiganji), Izumi Shikibu herself reasons that she is excluded because
of her gender:

I’ve heard that women are mired in sin—the Five
Obstructions and the Three Obediences—and I’ve
heard that they’re despised by the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and excluded from the eighty-thousand benefits of the Teaching. That the Master is away now too must be because a group of wicked women have come.21

As Izumi Shikibu おちょく in koto (and other versions of the story) continues, Izumi Shikibu recites her “kuraki yori” poem and turns to leave. Shōkū Shōnin overhears, and greatly moved by her allusion to the Lotus Sutra, he calls her back and invites her inside. Thus, by means of a poem (and her knowledge of the Lotus Sutra), Izumi Shikibu overcomes the nyōin kinsei of Enkyōji. According to the Lotus Sutra commentaries, Shōkū Shōnin later presents her with a copy of the Sutra—his answer to the problem of being a woman—while in Izumi Shikibu おちょく in koto and Rakuyō Seiganji engi, he admits to his own ignorance of Buddhism and sends her off on a wandering search that eventually leads to Seiganji.

The existence of Izumi Shikibu おちょく in koto may be a sign that women were gathering at Seiganji and spreading stories of Izumi Shikibu, as Yanagita suggests, from as early as the Kamakura period. Insofar as Izumi Shikibu おちょく in koto relates stories of Izumi Shikibu’s and Sei Shōnagon’s rebirth in Pure Land, and thus deals specifically with issues of women and Buddhism, it constitutes natural storytelling material for women preaching to other women. In addition, the text’s description of Izumi Shikibu’s meandering progress from her abode at the palace to her eventual home at Seiganji is not unlike the travels of the mendicant nuns who Yanagita argues were spreading their tales. If Izumi Shikibu おちょく in koto is indeed the text of a sermon performed by women (and unfortunately there is no direct evidence proving that it was), it would thus not only have encouraged women and promoted the worship of the Seiganji Amida, but also—by the natural association (in audiences’ minds) of the storytellers with their stories—lent a kind of glamour and legitimacy to the lives of the wandering nuns themselves.

Later Seiganji histories, most notably Rakuyō Seiganji engi, identify Izumi Shikibu’s dwelling at Seiganji as the Komidō, now a small Shingon temple known as Seishin’in (also “Jishin’in”), located immediately to the south of Seiganji. How and when Seishin’in came to be associated with Izumi Shikibu and Seiganji is unclear, but when Seiganji was rebuilt at its present location in 1597, Seishin’in was rebuilt beside it. To this day Seishin’in possesses a number of Izumi

Shikibu-related artifacts, including a painting of her attributed to Kanō Takanobu (1571–1618), a folding screen made from a robe supposedly given to her by Empress Shōshi, and a small wooden statue of her at a place of honor near the inner altar. In the Seishin’in cemetery there is a large stone memorial to Izumi Shikibu dated the fifth month of 1313, and the no play “Seiganji” (ca. 1464) contains allusions to it (Nishino 1998, 549–50). When considered in conjunction with Izumi Shikibu おちょく in koto and the Izumi Shikibu stories in Rakuyō Seiganji engi (including accounts of Izumi Shikibu’s miraculous encounter at Seiganji with a specifically female manifestation of the Seiganji Amida, and Izumi Shikibu’s later return to Seiganji as an emissary from Pure Land), the grave marker, the statue, and the other Izumi Shikibu-related artifacts suggest that Seishin’in / Seiganji sought to adopt or enshrine Izumi Shikibu in the medieval period as a kind of patron saint—a hero, perhaps, for the many nuns who Yanagita supposes were gathering there at the time.
A Hero for Women?

To assert that men spread stories of women who were turned to stone for violating nyonin kinsei while women spread stories of women challenging nyonin kinsei is overly simplistic. As we have seen, the monastic Tendai dangisho employed tales of Izumi Shikibu’s encounter with Shōkū Shōnin in their efforts to teach the Lotus Sutra, and we know from a 1502 entry in Nakamikado Nobutane’s diary that a Seiganjū priest—a man—visited Nobutane’s residence on the third day of the fourth month of that year and performed etoki (“picture-explaining”) while reading from a written text of Seiganjū history. However, it does seem possible to draw some gender-based distinctions among storytelling traditions. Another group of women, the Kumano bikuni, also appear to have told stories about Izumi Shikibu in the medieval period, and at least one of these concerned Izumi Shikibu’s struggle to overcome a restriction against women.

Tokuda Kazuo has identified a scene in eighteen extant paintings of the Nachi sankei mandara (Pilgrimage Mandala of Nachi Shrine) as a pictorial representation of a medieval tale of Izumi Shikibu’s sorrow at once having been unable to visit Kumano Shrine because of her menstrual period. Kumano bikuni used the mandalas as props in their etoki performances in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Izumi Shikibu’s apparent presence in most renderings of the artwork indicates that the story of her poetic exchange with the Kumano Deity may have been a standard feature of the nuns’ repertoire. Although alternate versions of the mandala differ in their details, in its overall aspects the painted scene is generally the same. A woman (Izumi Shikibu) stands beside a cherry tree at Ninose Bridge, just below the confluence of the Ichinose and Nachi rivers at the entrance to Nachi Kumano Shrine. The river functions within the painting as a natural boundary between the sacred inner precincts of the shrine-complex and the profane world outside, and Izumi Shikibu hesitates to cross over into the holy grounds because of the sudden onset of her “monthly obstruction.”

The poetic anthology Figa wakahig, completed in the second month of 1349, contains the earliest known version of the story in an explanatory note to poem #2099, attributed to the Kumano Deity:

When Izumi Shikibu visited Kumano [Shrine], she was unable to present her offering to the deity because of her [monthly] obstruction. She recited a poem:

harayarana
mi no ukigumo no
tanabikite
tsuki no sawari to
naru zo kanashiki

The sad, drifting clouds
of my body
trail the sky, uplifting,
now obstructing the moon.

How sad!

It is said that in her dream that night, [the Kumano Deity] recited this poem in reply:

moto yori mo
chiri ni majiwaru
kami nareba
tsuki no sawari mo
nani ga kurushiki

By my nature
I am a god
who mingles with the dust.
What could bother me about
the monthly obstruction?

Izumi Shikibu (right) at Nachi Kumano Shrine. Scene from Nachi sankei mandara emaki, 16th century. Courtesy of Kokugakuin University.
The *Fūga wakashū* story, presumably corresponding to an oral tradition of the Kumano *bikuni*, suggests that had Izumi Shikibu not been suffering from her monthly obstruction, she would have been able to visit the shrine and present her offering to the deity. Her visit is not prevented by a *nyonin kinsei* rule *per se*, but rather by a related Shinto taboo against menstruation. (According to medieval Japanese syncretic thought, there seems to have been little difference between the two.) In her poem, Izumi Shikibu draws on the two meanings of *tsuki no sawari*, both “monthly obstruction” and “moon obstruction.” The “sad, drifting clouds” of her femininity gather densely every month, becoming her monthly obstruction and blocking the light of the moon, a traditional metaphor for Buddhist Truth. Because it prevents her from visiting Kumano Shrine, Izumi Shikibu’s monthly obstruction is a true moon obstruction, darkening her way on the Path of the Buddha.

Ki no Tsurayuki wrote in his *Kokin wakashū* preface (ca. 905) that Japanese poetry has the power to “stir feeling in unseen demons and gods” (Kojima 1989, 4), and Izumi Shikibu’s poem indeed impels a reply. The Kumano Deity, commonly identified as a manifestation of Amida Buddha, appears to her in a dream that night, and he explains that because he is descended from the heavens to “mingle with the dust”—to associate freely with sentient beings in order to lead them to salvation—the impurity of her monthly obstruction causes him no offense. And even if it should gather like clouds and obstruct the moon, he seems to ask, how could it block his own light when he himself is descended to earth? The Kumano Deity declares the monthly obstruction to be no obstruction at all, and his poem is thus an affirmation of all women’s spiritual potential.

The painting of Izumi Shikibu at Kumano in the *Nachisanke mandara* is a small scene within the larger composition of the work, but it is significant because it suggests that women—Kumano *bikuni*—were telling stories about how Izumi Shikibu once used a poem to overcome her monthly obstruction and gain access to Kumano Shrine. In an alternate version of the tale cited in the mid-fourteenth-century *Shintōshū* (a collection of stories circulated by the monks of Agui, and compiled perhaps some ten years after *Fūga wakashū*), the Kumano Deity goes so far as to put an end to her period, metaphorically curing her of her spiritual impediments.26 The contrast with Kūkai’s eighty-three-year-old mother, who in *Karukaya* begins to menstruate when she violates the *nyonin kinsei* of Mt. Kōya, is striking. Unlike Kūkai’s mother, Izumi Shikibu is depicted in these various accounts—accounts apparently spread by both men and women—as a true hero for women. In overcoming the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of her femininity, she prompts the Kumano Deity to disclaim the obstructiveness of the monthly obstruction, thus liberating all women from the misogynist restriction against menstrual pollution at Kumano Shrine.

**Conclusion**

Reconstructing the oral storytelling traditions of such groups of women proselytizer-entertainers as the Seigenji and Kumano *bikuni* is fraught with difficulty. Seigenji burned, moved, and was reconstructed several times over the centuries, and due to the resulting loss of written records, determining if there ever even was a community of nuns at Seigenji is problematic. In the case of the Kumano *bikuni*, whose oral traditions have also been obscured by time, the best we can do is to identify scenes in their painted props with contemporaneous written accounts, and hope that the differences are not too extreme. Nevertheless, it is possible to extrapolate some parts of what were likely the performance repertoires of these women, and the reconstructions are intriguing. For while men in some monastic orders appear to have propounded tales intended to intimidate or demoralize women in Buddhism, women (and other groups of men) seem to have resisted with their own stories of Izumi Shikibu and other Heian women authors, prominent Japanese women who were able to overcome *nyonin kinsei* and the Five Obstructions and live on—in legend—as proto-feminist, poetic champions of medieval Japan.

**Notes**

Much of this article is based on materials in my doctoral dissertation, Kimbrough 1999. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for *Women & Performance* for his or her incisive comments and suggestions.

1. The earliest known citation of the proverb is in Taira Yasuyori’s twelfth-century *Hōbusushū*, which mistakenly attributes it to the *Nirvana Sutra*. Koizumi 1993, 212.

2. I use the term “medieval” (chisei) to refer to an age roughly corresponding to the Kamakura and Muromachi periods, 1185-1600.
3. Izumi Shikibu served in the salon of Empress Shōshi in the court of Emperor Ichijō (r. 986-1011). She is primarily known today for her poetry and her poetic diary, Izumi Shikibu nikki.

4. Although the Lotus Sutra propounds the Five Obstructions, it simultaneously denies their obstructiveness by telling the story of the eight-year-old Dragon Girl who attained Enlightenment before the eyes of a group of doubting men. Upon being told that she could not attain Buddhahood because of the Five Obstructions, the daughter of the nāga dragon king presented the Buddha with a precious jewel, and in an instant she was transformed into a man and then into a Buddha. It is precisely this type of doctrinal complexity and seeming inconsistency that may have invited women such as the nuns of Kumano and Seiganji to contest the misogynistic tendencies of mainstream Buddhist thought.

5. Groner 1984, 159 and 161. Saichō is recognized as the founder of the Japanese Tendai sect.

6. From Sakeiki, in Zōho Shiryō Taisei Kankōkai 1965, 6:104. The passage was reproduced nearly two hundred years later by Minamoto Akikane (1160-1215) in vol. 5 of Kojidan.

7. There are two earlier non-sekkyō-bushi versions of the Karukaya story: a nō play ("Karukaya"; author unknown), and an illustrated, handwritten manuscript dating from the Keichō era (1596-1614).

8. In an alternate version of the tale, fire rains down on Kūkai's mother and forces her to turn back. She then lives the rest of her life at Jison'in Temple at the foot of Mt. Kōya. Nishiguchi 1987, 134.


10. Ichijō shūgyōkushō survives in a single known manuscript, copied out by the monk Denkai in 1493 and photographically reproduced in Ichijō shūgyōkushō: eiin 1998.

11. The poem is Shinsenzai wakashū #894. It is also contained in the Matsubon text of Izumi Shikibu shū (compiled after 1439; poem #256), in Hisamatsu 1964, 177.

12. The Agonyū, or Agamas, are the four major collections of Hinayana sutras in the East Asian Buddhist canon; they correspond roughly to the five Pali Nikayas.


14. Seiganji is said to have been constructed in Nara in 667, and then moved to Kyoto sometime before 1209. It is presently located along Shinkyōgoku-dōri, where it has stood since its reconstruction in 1597. For a synopsis of Seiganji history, see Kimbrough 1999, 119-121, 133, and 158-59.

15. Komachiya 1990, 394 (poem #1342). The headnote to the poem, "Shōkū Shōnin no moto ni yomite tsukawashikeru," is ambiguous. Alternately translated, it might read, "Composed and sent to Shōkū Shōnin at his abode," although in setsuwa it is not generally interpreted in this way.

16. Takakusa 1924-32, 9:22c; Watson 1993, 121. In Watson's translation, the larger passage reads: "Living beings undergo constant suffering and anguish, / benighted, without teacher or guide, / not realizing there is a way to end suffering, / not knowing how to seek emancipation. / Through the long night increasingly they follow evil paths, / reducing the multitude of heavenly beings; / from darkness they enter into darkness, / to the end never hearing the Buddha's name."

17. These include Ichijō shūgyōkushō, Hokeyō jirin shūyōshō, Hokeyō jikidanshō, and Jikidan innenshū. See Kimbrough 1999, 102-114.


19. “Explain how women are sinful devils" is written in somewhat smaller characters than the surrounding text. It is possible that this line is not a part of Shōkū Shōnin’s instructions at all, but rather an extraneous note to the monk or nun using the account as a sermon.


23. The Nachi sankei mandara is a painted representation of the Nachi shrine-complex at Kumano. The mandala survives in 29 known versions, 22 of which Tokuda was able to investigate. Of these,
Works Cited:


The Zuishin-in is a large Shingon temple in southeastern Kyoto whose history dates back to the late tenth century. It is located in an area of the city once known as Ono that was by the mid-tenth century recognized as one of the seats of the Ono clan. The remains of the old Ono clan temple (ujidera) have been discovered close by the Zuishin-in and the Zuishin-in itself has deep connections with the clan. Ono no Komachi, the ninth-century waka poet whose eighteen poems appear in the Kokinshū, the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, is but one of many famous Ono family members whose names are associated with the temple.

Behind the main hall of the Zuishin-in is an ancient tumulus (tsuka) standing roughly a meter high with a broad, flat circular top. One would take it for a burial mound perhaps enshrining the remains of an early Ono clan leader, save for the signpost that tells us otherwise. This, we are told, is the Ono no Komachi letter mound (jumizuka), a grave, not of bones, but of letters. The temple brochure explains that thousands of bundles of letters received by Komachi from her aristocratic suitors were buried within the mound (“Zuishin-in monseki,” n.d.).

Sarah M. Strong
PERFORMING JAPANESE WOMEN

Table of Contents

Introduction: Other Histories of Japanese Performance ◊ 7
Steven T. Brown

Introduction: Contrasting Voices ◊ 15
Sara Jansen

Interactive Narrators and Performative Readers:
Gendered Interfacing in Heian Narratives ◊ 23
Lynne K. Miyake

Performing Sinners:
The Asobi and the Buddhist Discourse of Tsumi ◊ 43
Terry Kawashima

Voices from the Feminine Margin: Izumi Shikibu and the
Nuns of Kumano and Seiganji ◊ 59
R. Keller Kimbrough

Performing the Courtesan:
In Search of Ghosts at Zuishin-in Letter Mound ◊ 79
Sarah M. Strong

Challenging the Old Men: A Brief History
of Women in Noh Theater ◊ 97
Eric C. Rath

Reflections of Terute:
Searching for a Hidden Shaman-Entertainer ◊ 113
Susan Matisoff