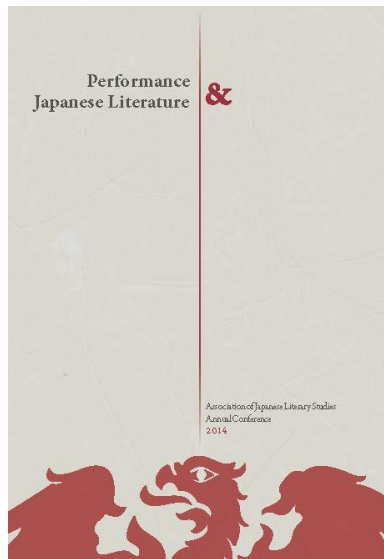


“How To Do Things With Poems: A Reassessment
of the Wondrous Powers of Waka”

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**How To Do Things With Poems:
A Reassessment of The Wondrous Powers of Waka**

Ariel Stilerman
Columbia University

Among the many anecdotes about *waka* poems that appear in various genres of the premodern period, a subgroup in which the poem brings the poet a material benefit is particularly puzzling. These anecdotes, usually called *katoku* 歌徳 ('virtues of waka'), have been variously described as the product of an ancient belief in the power of language (*kotodama*), as an effect of the fusion of poetry and Buddhist lore (*darani*), and as part of a strategy by aristocrats working as instructors of poetry to market their teachings to the new warrior elites. I argue that the miracles and other benefits brought by poems in these anecdotes are amplified versions of actual, social benefits that waka could bring, in particular benefits related to social mobility.

One of the more famous *katoku* anecdotes involves the poet and priest Nōin (b. 988). In the summer of 1024 there was a long drought in Iyo Province and the lack of rain threatened the rice crop. The Governor¹ came up from the capital together with Nōin, and when everything else had failed, he asked Nōin to offer a poem at Mishima Shrine, reasoning that as the gods were fond of waka poetry they would hear the plea. This was Nōin's poem:

Dam up the river of heaven
and divert the water down to our rice paddies.
Oh God, if you are a god that, like rain, comes down from heaven.
ama no gawa | nawashiromizu ni | seki kudase
ama kudarimasu | kami naraba kami

In the various versions of this anecdote the outcome is the same: the gods were moved and it rained torrentially. The anecdote originated in Nōin's private collection (*Nōin hōshi shū*; *Priest Nōin's Poems*, after 1050) and appears in the imperial anthology *Kinyōshū* (*Collection of Golden Leaves*, 1127; Book X Miscellaneous), in the poetic treatises *Toshiyori zuinō* (*Minamoto no Toshiyori's Essence of Poetry*, 1111-4) and *Fukurozōshi* (*The Book of the Bag*, 1158), in the Kamakura-period collections of anecdotes (*setsuwashū*) *Kokonchomonjū* (1254) and *Jikkishō* (1252), in the Muromachi-period collection *Tōsai zuihitsu* (*Essays*

¹ The identity of the governor varies according to the source. In *Kokonchomonjū* (episode 171) and *Jikkishō* (episode 10.10) the governor is Fujiwara no Sanetsuna (1012-82, in office at Iyo 1067-74), in *Fukurozōshi* Fujiwara no Sanekuni (1140-83), and in *Kinyōshū* Taira no Norikuni (early 11th C.). In *Goshūishū* (20), apropos a different poem, the governor of Iyo at the time of Nōin's visit is given as Fujiwara no Sukenari (988-1070).

of the Library Facing East, 1481), and the Genroku-era collection *Waka itoku monogatari* (*Tales of the Dignity and Virtue of Waka Poems*, 1689) among others.

Similar anecdotes pondering the wondrous powers of *waka* pop up everywhere. The earliest are, like this one, about the powers of poetry to bring rain, and appear already in *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Myriad Leaves*, 785).² Later, in the poem tales (*utamonogatari*) of the 10th century, poems show a power to bring men and women together in spite of obstacles, and to mend the bonds of affection between estranged lovers. The first explicit discussion of the powers of *waka* is in the *kana* preface to *Kokinwakashū* (905), where Ki no Tsurayuki (ca. 870-ca. 945) wrote that “What without effort moves heaven and earth, affects the invisible gods and demons, softens the relationships of men and women, and consoles the heart of fierce warriors, that is *waka*.”³ This list of benefits would later become a manifesto of the powers of *waka*, and be quoted over and over in medieval and early modern texts. However, his manifesto remained a formulaic statement, as Tsurayuki didn’t explain how these powers work, nor provide any evidence—or even a simple illustration—of them. In fact, Tsurayuki was paraphrasing a passage in the Great Preface to the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*):

To move heaven and earth, to affect the Gods and Buddhas, there is nothing better than poetry (*shi*). With it, the rulers of the past managed the relations between husband and wife, instilled feelings of filiality and respect, strengthened moral behavior, embellished the act of teaching, and changed the customs of the people.⁴

Two hundred years later, at the turn of the twelfth century, the interest in the powers of *waka* took a new turn. New anecdotes with new types of benefits started to appear in collections of anecdotal literature (*setsuwa*) and poetic treatises (*karon*). At the same time that the benefits brought by a poem were

² Book XVIII of *Man'yōshū* records poems with a headnote describing a *katoku* anecdote. According to the headnote, Ōtomo no Yakamochi (718-785) recited the long-form (*chōka*) poem n. 4122 and its envoy (*hanka*) n. 4123, when after three weeks of draught the skies got cloudy and it looked like it could rain. Poem n. 4122 describes the suffering brought by the draught and is a direct appeal to not waste the opportunity and make the clouds rain; its last line is simply “give us rain” (*ame mo tamawane*). A third poem, n. 4124, was recited three days later and is an expression of gratitude for the rain that followed the first two poems.

³ ちからをもいれずしてあめつちをうごかし、めに見えぬおに神をもあはれとおもはせ、をとこをむなのなかをもやはらげ、たけきものふの心をもなぐさむるは、うたなり

⁴ 動天地感鬼神莫近於詩。先王以是經夫婦成孝敬厚人倫美教化移風俗。For an analysis of the influence of Chinese works of literary criticism on Tsurayuki and Yoshimochi’s prefaces to *Kokinshū* see Wixted, John Timothy, “Chinese Influences on the *Kokinshū* Prefaces,” *Kokinshū: a Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*, Ed. Laurel R. Rodd and Mary C. Henkenius, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); and “The *Kokinshū* Prefaces: Another Perspective,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43, no. 1 (June 1, 1983), 215–38.

becoming more diverse, these anecdotes started to be grouped into clusters, revealing an awareness of thematic unity among their disparate settings and plots: Thanks to a poem, a sick person would recover her health; or a boat about to capsizes would be saved by a god; or an old man would have his life extended; or a wrathful god would be appeased; or a person falsely accused would be suddenly cleared of suspicion. In some anecdotes a ruler would bestow rank and rewards to a poet; or a judge would pardon a criminal after hearing his poem; or a poet would achieve immortal fame by having her poem included in an imperial anthology. In others, a rejected lover would be taken back, or a poet would win the heart of a person of much higher social class. The protagonists and the benefits varied, but in all cases the anecdotes highlighted the poem as the effective cause. And it is apparent that they were compiled together because they illustrated a mysterious power of *waka*. This can be seen in twelfth-century works like the poetic treatises *Toshiyori zuinō* and *Fukurozōshi*. The same anecdotes were later taken up in anecdotal collections like *Kokonchomonjū*, *Jikkinshō*, and *Shasekishū* (*A Collection of Sand and Pebbles*, 1283), as well as in other poetic treatises like *Waka dōmō shō* (*A Selection of Waka poems for Callow Children*, 1145), *Kenshō's Shūchūshō* (*A Selection in the Sleeve*, 1185-90), *Shunzei's Korai fūtei shō* (*A Selection of Notes on Traditional Poetic Style*, 1197-1201), *Waka iroha* (*The Basics of Waka Poems*, 1198), *Kamo no Chōmei's Mumyōshō* (*Selections Without a Title*, 1211), *Nomori no kagami* (*Historical Tale of the Guard of the Fields*, 1295), and *Sei'a-shō* (*Selection of the Frog in the Well*, 1360-64); and in all major *setsuwa* collections: *Konjaku monogatari shū* (*Tales of Times Now Past*, 1120), *Uji shūi monogatari* (*Tales from Uji*, early 13th c.), *Hōbutsushū* (*A Collection of Treasures*, 1177-81), *Kohon setsuwashū* (*A Collection of Tales of the Old Books*, early Kamakura period), *Hosshinshū* (*A Collection of Awakenings to the Faith*, before 1216), *Senjūshō* (*A Selection of Tales*, before 1275), *Yotsugi monogatari* (*Tales of Successive Reigns*, early Kamakura period), *Ima monogatari* (*Tales of the Present*, after 1239), and *Shintōshū* (*Collection on the Way of the Gods*, 1358).

For the simple reason that there aren't that many works on *waka* without one such anecdote about its powers, it is impossible to conceptualize premodern *waka* practice without making sense of *katoku* discourse. In *Chaos and Cosmos: Ritual in Early and Medieval Japanese Literature* (1990), Herbert Plutschow develops the concept of "ritual literature" as the representation in writing of oral and dramatic performances.⁵ He argues that "Music gave rise to song and song in turn to poetry... Controlled by the order of rhythm, form and sound, language was believed to generate a magical power.... The ancient Japanese used the word *kotodama* to denote such power of language."⁶ As an illustration of this *kotodama*, Plutschow offers the poem Nōin quoted above.

⁵ Herbert E. Plutschow, *Chaos and Cosmos. Ritual in Early and Medieval Japanese Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 5.

⁶ Plutschow, 10.

Such was the standard theory in Japanese academia since the 1970s. Moriyama Shigeru, the first to investigate anecdotes about the powers of *waka* in a systematic way, opened his seminal 1974 essay with a quote from Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) that explains these powers as *kotodama*⁷; that same year, Watanabe Shōichi described them as “the *kotoage* where a person attains a wish by means of a *waka* poem that achieves a supernatural benefit.”⁸

The concept of *kotodama* as a transhistorical belief in a general power of language (while at the same time unique to the Japanese language) has met more recently with a series of harsh rebuttals, in particular because it is not attested in classical or medieval works in the sense attributed to it by these modern scholars.⁹ The present understanding is that medieval poets seemed more interested in a power specific to *waka* poetry or to poetry in general, both of which *are* widely attested.

The earliest work to compile *katoku* anecdotes into clusters was *Toshiyori zuinō* by Minamoto no Toshiyori (1055-1129), also the first to use the concept of *katoku* and to connect it retroactively to Tsurayuki. In the cluster that contains Nōin’s anecdote, Toshiyori quoted Tsurayuki’s *kana* preface,¹⁰ and a few sections later, after relating two anecdotes in which poets avoid punishment thanks to a poem, explained that “it is said that they were pardoned thanks to the virtue of *waka* poems.”¹¹ Toshiyori’s concept of *katoku* suggests a virtue specific to *waka*; not long after, Fujiwara no Kiyosuke (1104-77) included in *Fukurozōshi* anecdotes about the powers of poetry in Chinese (*kanshi*) juxtaposed to *waka katoku* narratives.

This became the standard approach in medieval poetics. For example, in his influential commentary to the *Kokinshū* (*Kokinshū joshō*, 1264), Fujiwara no Tameie (1198-1275), also the first to point out that Tsurayuki’s statement on the powers of *waka* replicated a passage in the *Book of Odes*, argued that Tsurayuki described a “*katoku*” 歌徳 after the model of the “*shi-toku*” 詩徳 (“the virtue of Chinese poetry”) because “the poetry of China (*shi*) and the poetry of Japan (*waka*) differ in their language (*kotoba*), but are identical in

⁷ Moriyama Shigeru, ‘Katoku Setsuwa Ron Josetsu,’ *Onomichi tanki daigaku kenkyū kiyō*, 23 (1974). Moriyama is quoting from Origuchi, Shinobu, *Nihon Bungaku Keimō* (Tokyo: Chūō kōron sha, 1997), *Origuchi Shinobu zenshū* v. xxiv.

⁸ Watanabe Shōichi, *Nihongo no kokoro* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1974). Quoted in Moriyama Shigeru, ‘Katoku No Shujusō,’ *Onomichi tanki daigaku kenkyū kiyō*, 26 (1977).

⁹ See Roy Andrew Miller, “The ‘Spirit’ of the Japanese Language,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 3.2 (1977): 251–298; and the response from the *kotodama* camp in Sukehiro Hirakawa, “In Defense of the ‘Spirit’ of the Japanese Language,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 7.2 (1981): 393–402. Also, Willem Jan Boot, “Kotodama and the Ways of Reading the *Man’yōshū*,” in *Florilegium Japonicum*, eds. Bjarke Frellesvig and Christian Morimoto Hermansen (Kobenhavn: Akademisk Forlag, 1996). An excellent critical account of the few instances in which *kotodama* and *kotoage* appear in classical texts and a philological examination of the extensive deployment of these expressions in the work of the Nativist (*kokugaku*) scholars of the Edo period can be found in the unpublished MA thesis of Iori Jōko, “Reassessing Kotodama: Usages and Interpretations.”

¹⁰ SNKBZ, vol. 87, 50.

¹¹ SNKBZ, vol. 87, 56. この歌の徳にゆるされにけりとぞ聞こゆる。

spirit (*kokoro*).¹² Neither *Kokinshū* nor the *Book of Odes* mention a *katoku* or a *shitoku*; by superimposing these new categories onto canonical texts, Toshiyori and Tameie were able to ‘discover’ a precedent for their own interest in anecdotes that illustrated the powers of *waka*. Also, that Chinese poetry is the point of reference—both in Tsurayuki’s preface and in its medieval commentaries—provides further evidence against a *kotodama* belief in a general power exclusive to the Japanese language. It also becomes evident that up to this point the lack of details about the actual mechanism behind the power of poetry was not a source of anxiety for *waka* poets and scholars.

This changed with Priest Mujū Ichien (a.k.a. Mujū Dōgyō; 1226-1312), who in the anecdotal collection *Shasekishū* collected many *katoku* stories and argued that the powers of *waka* are the same as the powers of Indian mantras called *darani*, Buddhist teachings recited in Sanskrit, held to have magical powers. Mujū explained that

The thirty-one chapters of the Mahavairocana Sutra correspond naturally to the thirty-one syllables [of *waka* poems]. Because the principles of worldly and religious life are contained in these thirty-one syllables, they provoke a response from Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and move Gods and humans. Even though *darani* are in the vernacular language of India, if one applies the name ‘*darani*’ [to *waka* poems], they have the virtue of burning bad karma. Even though the *waka* poems of Japan are also in the vernacular language, by uttering a poem and expressing one’s feelings, one necessarily provokes an emotional response. If [poems] are composed in the spirit of the Buddhist Law, all the more there is no doubt that they are *darani*.¹³

Mujū Ichien was not the only one to assert the equivalence between *waka* poems and Indian *darani*; for example, the poetic treatise *Nomori no kagami* (*Historical Tale of the Guard of the Fields*, 1295) includes a passage that equates *waka* poetry to the true words of Buddhism (*shingon*)¹⁴. This connection

¹² Quoted in Kamioka Yūji, *Wakasetsumu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kasama shoin, 1986), 185; and in Watanabe Shōgo, “Katoku Setsuwa No Hassei,” *Setsumu bungaku kenkyū* (1988): 4. 詩徳かくのごとし。哥又しかるべし。漢士の詩・和国の歌、ことばことなりといへども、こゝろかはることなし。これによりて、彼の詩のこゝろをとりて、この歌の事をあらはずなり。

¹³ Takayuki Kojima, ed., *Shasekishū*, SNKBZ, vol. 52. (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2001). Episode 5a14.4. 大日経の三十一品も自ら三十一字に当たれり。世間出世の道理を三十一字の中に包みたれば、仏菩薩の応もあり、神明人類の感あり。かの陀羅尼も天竺の世俗の詞なれども、陀羅尼と名づけて此を以てば、滅罪の徳あり。日本の和歌も世の常の詞なれども、和歌と言ひて、思ひも述べれば、必ず感あり。まして、仏法の心を含めらむは、疑ひなく陀羅尼なるべし。

¹⁴ Also, for an analysis of the influence of Ichien’s *darani* equivalence on the Edo-period National Learning scholar Keichū 契沖 (1640-1701)’s *Manyō-daishoki* 万葉代匠記 (1688-90), see Torquill

between *waka* and *darani* is not arbitrary: in the context of the doctrine of Shintō-Buddhist syncretism (*honji-suijaku*), if the *kami* are the local manifestation of Buddhas, it follows logically that *waka* poems can be the counterpart of Indian *darani*. It must be noted also that the *darani* equivalence was closely connected to the medieval interest in overcoming Buddhist condemnations of poetry and of literary pursuits in general.¹⁵

In *Chaos and Cosmos*, Plutschow forces this equivalence further, suggesting that “what was called *kotodama* in the Shintō tradition became the *darani* and *shingon* in Japanese Buddhism.”¹⁶ However, while the equivalence between *waka* and *darani* does appear in texts like *Shasekishū*, the connection of *darani* to *kotodama* is not attested anywhere. A more recent generation of scholars, among them Kamioka Yūji, Watanabe Shōgo, and Ogawa Toyō, have moved against this insistence on *kotodama* in the analysis of *katoku*. Reflecting this trend, in his essay “Reading the Miraculous Powers of Japanese Poetry: Spells, Truth Acts, and a Medieval Buddhist Poetics of the Supernatural” (2005), R. Keller Kimbrough argued that in Medieval Japan circulated “a ‘dharani theory,’ according to which Japanese poetry is capable of supernatural effects because, as the dharani of Japan, it contains ‘reason’ or ‘truth’ [*kotowari*] in a semantic superabundance.”¹⁷ Kimbrough stated further that in his rainmaking poem, Nōin uses wordplay (the phrase *ama kudarimasu kami*, both ‘a god come down from heaven’ and ‘a god who gives us rain’) to oblige the deity to make it rain. Through linking the truth of the deity’s origins (that it is a god come down from heaven) with the conjecture that it is a deity who bestows rain, Nōin creates a situation in which the deity cannot deny Nōin’s one statement without denying the other.¹⁸ Taking a different approach, Susan Klein analyzes esoteric medieval commentaries to the *Kokinshū* and to other canonical works, and connects the attempts to present the poetic canon as part of the Shingon worldview—as well as the creation of esoteric initiations to teaching the secrets

Duthie, “Manyō Daishoki No Rekishigakuteki Igi Omegutte.” *Anahorisshu kokubungaku* (2013): 108–114.

¹⁵ A condemnation summed up in the expression *kyōgen kigo* (“wild words and fancy phrases”), originally taken from a poem in which the Chinese poet Bo Juyi (772-846) prays that the transgressions of his poetry be turned into good causes and lead to religious enlightenment. In his study of Kamo no Chōmei, Rajyashree Pandey analyzes the origin and development of this concept, and the answers of late Heian and Kamakura thinkers working within the Buddhist doctrine to this challenge to the validity of literary pursuits. As Pandey shows, one of the most influential and widespread answers was the notion of *waka* poetry as an expedient means (*J. hōben*, Sk. *upāya*) to Buddhist salvation, that is, a pragmatic mix of Buddhist truth and worldly elements. This is precisely the logic behind Mujū’s reasoning in this passage. Rajyashree Pandey, *Writing and Renunciation in Medieval Japan: the Works of the Poet-Priest Kamo No Chōmei* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1998).

¹⁶ Plutschow, 169.

¹⁷ R. Keller Kimbrough, “Reading the Miraculous Powers of Japanese Poetry: Spells, Truth Acts, and a Medieval Buddhist Poetics of the Supernatural,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32.1 (2005): 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

of poetry—to the rivalry between households whose main occupation was the teaching of poetry. Klein argues that the Rokujō household, the Mikohidari household, and the subsequent feuding branches of the Mikohidari, “had been excluded from political power [and] were competing in the cultural sphere for court-sanctioned privileges such as the right to judge poetry contests and compile imperial anthologies.”¹⁹ Following Klein’s reasoning, *katoku* (and *shitoku*) discourses and narratives can be read as an effort to fabricate secret—that is, proprietary—knowledge to leverage cultural, social, and financial power. As Kelin suggests, until late-Heian, *waka* had played essential roles in court life, and poetic knowledge was evidence of good upbringing, but in the Kamakura period it became cultural capital.²⁰ Knowledge about *waka* became a commodity that could be traded for political resources (influence) and financial resources (land rights). As this knowledge was useful, in short supply, and expensive, it is tempting to see *katoku* as the esoteric sales pitch of the new *waka* teachers.

As I showed above, anecdotes about the powers of poetry emerged as a distinct, consolidated type in *Toshiyori zuinō*; only later early-Medieval scholars attempted to connect them to similar anecdotes about *kanshi* (in *Fukurozōshi*), explain them with recourse to the authority of Chinese texts (in *Kokinshū joshō*), or root them in Buddhist thought (in *Shasekishū*). It shouldn’t be overlooked that *katoku* narratives precede medieval hermeneutical efforts to explain them, and that many anecdotes about the powers of *waka* include a secular benefit, obtained without divine intervention and without any esoteric elements. Beyond their differences, both *kotodama* and *darani* theories emphasize the magical aspects of *katoku*. Yet there are many cases where a poem captivates a person of much higher social class, or the ruler bestows rank and office on a poet, or a judge lets a criminal free, or a prostitute receives prestige and rewards for her poetic skills. Furthermore, even in the eminently Buddhist *Shasekishū*, the section “On gods that are moved by poems and help people” is followed by a much longer section “On poems that moved people.”²¹ These divine anecdotes and secular anecdotes have in common that the person or god granting the benefit is acting on an emotional reaction provoked by the poem, which is often registered with the expression *kan ari* (感あり). This emotional reaction, however, can only take us so far in terms of explaining the mechanism behind *katoku*. Readers and audiences are moved by poems on a daily basis, but the cases where the poet receives a benefit are comparatively few. Moreover, in *katoku* anecdotes the benefits are always grand. Exaggerated, even: a rainmaking poem brings a downpour rather than a sprinkle; criminal punishment is pardoned in full, not merely reduced; etc. *Katoku* benefits are life-changing. What is it then that

¹⁹ Susan Blakeley Klein, *Allegories of Desire: Esoteric Literary Commentaries of Medieval Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 298.

²⁰ See Pierre Bordieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²¹ 明神、歌を感じて人を助け給う事 (Section 5b1) and 人の感ある和歌の事 (Section 5b2). SNKBZ, vol. 52, 259-87.

makes only *some* poems have efficacy? In early medieval anecdotes about the wondrous powers of *waka* I see traces of a profound shift in *waka's* modes of performativity. It wasn't the poems themselves that were changing, but the things a person could do with them.

Ogawa Toyō suggests that secular *katoku* anecdotes are modeled on a subgenre of *waka* known as *jukkai*, where the poet complains about personal misfortunes and often asks the ruler for patronage in the form of rank and office.²² The popularity of *jukkai* poems in early medieval society reflects the political turmoil that had shaken the traditional relationships of patronage and the traditional functions of poetry, in particular because these poems posit a sovereign who can still provide his subjects with goods and honors: they reasserted the political contract precisely at a time when it was being challenged. Ogawa argues that *katoku*, like *jukkai*, express a nostalgia for the past, while at the same time reflecting new opportunities for social mobility, as *jukkai* were addressed not only at Retired Emperors, but also at the new warrior rulers in Kamakura. This analysis works heuristically, opening the possibility to reassess the wondrous powers of *waka* in connection to the diverse functions that poems played in society, which went beyond subject-ruler bonds.

Asking what poems can do, or more specifically, what can one do with poems, is to reveal their performative aspects. I mean “performative” in the sense of J. L. Austin’s “performative utterances.” Where Plutschow posits a magic spell and Kimbrough sees a statement of truth, I notice a type of statement that doesn’t describe or report and that is neither true nor false. To borrow Austin’s terminology, in a *katoku* poem “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action,” provided it is uttered under appropriate circumstances.²³ The key is the “appropriate circumstances,” the conditions of possibility for the efficacy of poetry, which explain why only some poems are effective.

Then, what kind of action is performed in *katoku*? In all types of *katoku* anecdotes the poem is part of a social performance for an audience, and the action performed by the poem has to do with the social prestige of *waka*. *Katoku* anecdotes depict differences in power. Independently of whether the poem is recited at court, presented at a shrine, whispered to a passerby, or sent in a letter, poet and addressee are invariably separated by a disparity in leverage, in class, in gender, or in age: humans appeal to gods, subjects appeal to rulers, commoners appeal to aristocrats, a dispossessed woman appeals to her philandering husband, a peasant boy appeals to a noblewoman. The benefits brought by the poem speak to these differences. If the emotional reaction (and

²² Ogawa Tōyō, “Katokuron Josetsu,” in *Higi to shite no waka: kōi to ba*, ed. Yasuaki Watanabe (Tokyo: Yūseidō shuppan, 1995).

²³ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 6. The importance of these “appropriate circumstances” is emphasized by Austin. David Lurie suggested to me that they offer a good way to rethink our approach to Nara period *kotodama*, as they offer a model to think about the powers of language in a ritual—i.e. more specific and local—context.

the emotional connection it suggests) plays a role at all it is because it implies a sense of community beyond social and personal differences. *Katoku* poems are part of a performance that bridges a gap in social hierarchy. The poet uses the poem to overcome a social disadvantage.

This is not to offer an alternative to the *darani* theory or its connection to the quest for esoteric secrets to peddle in the cultural market. My argument concerns the anecdotes themselves, which were mainly developed by late-Heian, while medieval esoteric interpretations of the powers of *waka* appeared in mid-Kamakura. These esoteric interpretations are thus a later development, specific to the medieval context. The narratives themselves appeared earlier as exaggerated or symbolic renderings of *waka*'s actual (if comparatively small) social powers. These powers only grew with the downfall of the court. After the Genpei War (1180-5) and the failed Jōkyū Rebellion (1221) opened the court to other social groups—the groups for whom court culture became cultural capital—and courtly poets became professional instructors. For the new students, learning *waka* opened a path to be invited to sophisticated salons, where one could absorb the etiquette of the court and be in contact with people of higher social status. However, as the *katoku* anecdotes of Heian make patent, the (social) powers of *waka* preexisted the transformation of *waka* practice into an aspirational pastime for the warrior elite. The miracles in them are an exaggerated reflection of the powers of *waka* to secure status, office, and social prestige. Through hyperbole, they speak to the many small, local, social miracles that a *waka* education could perform at the everyday level. The miraculous anecdotes where poems bring rain or heal illness can be seen as a transposition of the utility of *waka* from one realm (the court, where they help a lady win the respect and affection of her emperor) to another (the supernatural world of gods and Buddhas, who make miracles).

Conceptualizing *katoku* anecdotes as amplified versions of the actual benefits of *waka* allows us to understand these narratives in their social context without having to reduce them to schemes and fabrications of profit-oriented *waka* instructors. Simultaneously, it makes possible to posit a power of utterances that is local and specific (but not exclusive to Japan), as opposed to a general, vague power of language. And, finally, it allows us to explain why these narratives received intense attention at least a century before the appearance of the theory (the *darani* equivalence) under which they would be conceptualized for the rest of the premodern period.