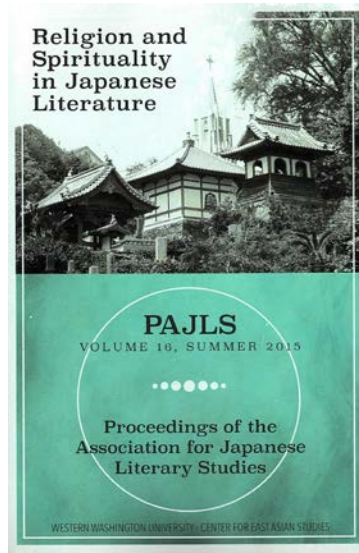


“Million Dollar Question: Does the Woman’s Body Matter? An Examination into Female Salvation as Represented in *The Tale of the Heike*”

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***Million Dollar Question:
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Introduction

In medieval Japan, competing ideologies on how enlightenment is achieved depended largely on different schools and interpretations of the fundamental Buddhist teachings. However, in practice, enlightenment in the medieval imagination was generally conceived on the basis of exchanges among the Pure Land discourse, the *Lotus Sutra* teachings, and the Mahāyāna Buddhist principle of buddha-nature. The Pure Land discourse emphasizes rebirth in Amida's paradise through the critical practice of *nembutsu*, the chanting of Amida's invocations. One of the most well known Mahāyāna sutras, *Lotus Sutra* has been central to the Tendai (*Lotus Sutra*) school and widely used in other traditions like Zen, Sanron, and Hossō. The concept of buddha-nature is the phenomenon that not only does a sentient being have the potential to be a Buddha, but that all sentient beings are (already) born Buddhas. Yet, this concept is problematic in the institutional hierarchy of the Buddhist worldview, which consists of the six realms. The hierarchy clearly highlights that sentient beings are not all the same even if they all possess buddha-nature. I will further explore this concept in regard to the "Devadatta" chapter from the *Lotus Sutra*, and the deeper issue concerning salvation for women.

The paradigmatic medieval Japanese religious woman is the widow who makes the socially sanctioned decision to take the tonsure and renounce the secular world. She is expected to pray and make offerings on behalf of her dead family members in order to ensure that they successfully reach the Pure Land, where she herself hopes to rejoin them one day. Other medieval women may choose to become nuns for a vocation to study esoteric teachings. And some women, aristocrats in particular, choose the nun lifestyle to acquire more autonomy over their socioeconomic rights.

Consequently, there are a variety of reasons why and how medieval women choose to identify as a Buddhist nun. In this paper, I am interested in the

motives behind the choice to attain enlightenment as depicted in literature. I aim to examine to what degree representations of women in literature, specifically in the *Heike monogatari* (*Tale of the Heike*), participate in the religious discourse on female salvation. In tandem, I will explore the Dragon King's daughter's story of enlightenment from two sutras, the *Lotus Sutra* and *The Sutra of the Sāgara, the Nāga King*, to show doctrinal basis for differing views of female salvation. Based on these sutra interpretations, I will then focus on the chapters concerning Giō and Kenreimon'in from *Heike monogatari* (*Tale of the Heike*). Using the two portrayals of the Dragon King's daughter as a starting place to discuss the relationship between the female body and salvation, I argue that Giō and Kenreimon'in's attitudes toward Buddhism represent two distinct ideas of female salvation. I find that Giō's choice to become a nun can be interpreted as the only course of action available to her, which presents a commonly understood approach to Buddhist life for women. In contrast, Kenreimon'in invokes the dragon girl and associated esoteric teachings to support her claim of already having attained enlightenment as a woman in the present (human) world.

Before I examine the *Heike* examples, I will first introduce and examine how Buddhist salvation for women is symbolized in the dragon girl's story in the famous "Devadatta" chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Then, I will compare that story to another sutra's version of the dragon girl in a corresponding chapter called "Jewel Brocade Receives the Prediction," in *The Sutra of the Sāgara, Nāga king*. Third, I will explore the *Heike* episodes concerning Giō and Kenreimon'in before delving into the problematized and much debated issue of how the female body is imagined as obstructed from salvation.

Bodies of Women, Real and Imagined, in the Dragon King Daughter's Performance

As one of the eminent Mahāyāna sutras, the *Lotus Sutra* is self-referential and extols itself as the preeminent sutra among all other sutras, and emphasizes the concept of buddha-nature. Broadly speaking, this is the concept that all sentient beings are already buddhas, though most are unaware of this. This concept is critical in the reading of the "Devadatta" chapter, where both Devadatta, an enemy of the Buddha, and the dragon king's daughter are able to achieve enlightenment in spite of their worldly sins. In other words, they symbolize the belief that even an evildoer and (female) animal can achieve buddhahood. More

specifically, Śāriputra,¹ here representing what Mahāyāna held to be the limited way of the *arhat*, criticized the dragon girl saying: “A woman’s body is filthy, it is not a dharma receptacle. How can you attain unexcelled bodhi [enlightenment]? [...] Also, a woman’s body even then has five obstacles. [...] How can the body of a woman speedily achieve buddhahood?”² That is when the assembly of all bodhisattvas and buddhas witnessed the dragon girl, in a blink of an eye, instantly turn into a man, perfect her bodhisattva practice, and manifest her enlightenment by going to her pure land.³

Thus, the dragon girl’s story is evidence of a woman (or female animal) possessing the ability to achieve salvation instantaneously. However, it is important to point out that her story also upholds the view that the woman must still change into a man first, which is in accordance with the principle that a woman cannot attain enlightenment because of the five obstructions, which prevent her from attaining the five higher existences of godly beings⁴ including the Buddha.⁵ This restriction on physical transformation is an ongoing soteriological issue that differs depending on interpretations and even the version of the dragon girl story.

As I mentioned in the beginning, there is at least one other version of this story found in *The Sutra of Sāgara, the Nāga king*.⁶ This sutra was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in 285 A.D., and was popularly used for rain rituals during the Nara period (710-794) in Japan. Chapter fourteen, “Jewel Brocade Receives the Prediction,” is the corresponding chapter to the “Devadatta” from the *Lotus Sutra*. In this second sutra, when the dragon king’s daughter, here called Jewel Brocade, is told, “One cannot attain Buddhahood within a woman’s body,” she critically counters with “one cannot attain it within a man’s body either. What is the reason? Because the thought of enlightenment is neither male nor female. [...] The one who perceives through Emptiness is

¹ Śāriputra is one of the ten direct disciples of the Buddha, an *arhat*.

² Leon Hurvitz, trans, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma [The Lotus Sutra]* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 184.

³ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴ The five godly beings are the Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Cakravartin king, and Buddha.

⁵ Yoshida Kazuhiko, “The Enlightenment of the Dragon King’s Daughter in *The Lotus Sutra*,” in *Engendering Faith*, ed. Barbara Ruch, trans. Margaret H. Childs (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 299.

⁶ Diana Y. Paul and Frances Wilson, *Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), 235-43.

neither male nor female.”⁷ Her response highlights two important interpretations on the soteriological issue for women in regard to the teaching of emptiness. One, not only is the physical transformation from woman to man not required, but the physical transformation itself is an illusion. Second, the Buddha will listen to those who are committed to the practice of a bodhisattva. Jewel Brocade’s insight reflects the teaching of emptiness and nonduality, which speaks of all phenomena as impermanent, because phenomena are the result of causes and conditions coming together. In other words, the woman’s body is not permanent; it is the result of various causes and conditions coming together to produce a thing defined as a “woman’s body,” but there is nothing inherently permanent about a woman’s body. In this episode, Jewel Brocade concludes by expounding her knowledge on emptiness and enlightenment, and the Buddha praises her for understanding the Dharma.

D. Max Moerman points out that, in comparison to the dragon girl of the *Lotus Sutra*, Jewel Brocade differs in her response to the accusation of a woman unable to attain buddhahood by expounding her wisdom on emptiness through an oral performance.⁸ In contrast, the dragon king’s daughter in the *Lotus Sutra* delivers a performance that is both physical and spiritual. Yet, it is not that these two representations of the dragon girl are opposing each other. Rather, I think the two versions highlight how the dragon girl responds to the fundamental assumption that she cannot attain enlightenment because she is not a man. The dramatic physical and spiritual performance may appear more shocking since the *Lotus Sutra* version answers that a woman may achieve buddhahood even in an instant. On the other hand, the Jewel Brocade episode ends with the Buddha answering the audience’s question about when she would attain enlightenment:

This girl Jewel Brocade, after three hundred immeasurable eons, will attain Buddhahood and be called Universal World, the Tathāgata, Arhat, Completely Enlightened One. Her [Buddha] world will be called Radiance. The era will be pure. The world of Radiance will be eternally luminescent with the rays of the Tathāgata. The bodhisattvas will number ninety-two million. The Buddha’s life will be ten short eons.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 235-6.

⁸ D. Max Moerman, *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 189.

⁹ Paul and Wilson, 241.

The conventional prediction of Jewel Brocade's fantastic buddhaland positions her as an equal of innumerable, other male bodhisattvas. This is an interesting difference from the *Lotus Sutra* dragon girl's enlightenment where she could

in the space of an instant turn into a man, perfect bodhisattva-conduct, straightway go southward to the world-sphere Spotless, sit on a jeweled lotus blossom, and achieve undifferentiating, right, enlightened intuition, with thirty-two marks and eighty beautiful features setting forth the Fine Dharma for all living beings in all ten directions.¹⁰

Both enlightenment scenarios follow conventions such as confirming buddhahood, bestowing a Buddha name, and the name of the buddhaland. Yet, nuanced differences show that Jewel Brocade's enlightenment emphasizes her buddhaland, whereas the *Lotus Sutra* dragon girl's enlightenment underlines her enlightened physical characteristics such as the "thirty-two marks" of a Buddha.¹¹ The following table summarizes these key characteristic differences:

	<i>Lotus Dragon King's Daughter</i>	Jewel Brocade
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Physical, spiritual transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Orally expounds the teaching of emptiness
Emphasis after attaining buddhahood	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Her enlightened characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Her wonderful buddhaland

Despite these differences, I find that the dragon king's daughter's story in both accounts serves to provide a soteriological paradigm for women. Though the method of salvation differs depending on the teaching, the fact remains that the dragon girl in both accounts finds an accessible way.

¹⁰ Hurvitz, 201.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

Reexamination of Heike Episodes and Their Soteriological Significance

I now turn to the two episodes in the *Heike monogatari*. There are at least four extant variants, and of the four, the *Engyōbon* is said to be written with a heavy Buddhist influence. However, I intend to focus on the *Kakuichibon* version for this paper because of its familiarity with a wider audience to explore how Giō and Kenreimon'in, two well-known female characters in the book, are representative of two different classes of women who approach a Buddhist life for different reasons.

The “Typical” One: Giō and “Hotoke”

The “Giō” episode appears in the *Heike* narrative at the height of Taira no Kiyomori’s power, and is an example of a *hosshin setsuwa* (revelatory story) illustrating how and when Giō decided to pursue the Buddhist path. This episode describes *shirabyōshi* (dancer) Giō’s fall from her favored position at court, when another dancer, Hotoke Gozen, ends up taking over Giō’s position. The change in situation motivates Giō to become a Buddhist nun when she realizes her life as a *shirabyōshi* is miserable and dependent on the whims of her patron. So with her sister and mother, they live in a remote hut and chant Amida’s name to be reborn in his paradise. Later, Hotoke drops by, admitting that she too realizes her dancing life will end just as quickly as Giō’s, and the two join together in pursuit of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Elizabeth Oyler reinterprets Giō and Hotoke’s change from *shirabyōshi* to nuns not only as a shift in attitude and vocation, but more importantly as embodying buddha-nature precisely because of their worldly beauty:

Their goodness [which she gathers from their beauty and compassion] cannot be separated from their worldliness. The conflation of the holy and the worldly is essential to their identity, as most clearly illustrated by Hotoke: allegorically, she is a *hotoke*—a Buddha—whose ability to bring truth depends on her mobility and desirability as a performing woman.¹²

In this way, Hotoke functions as a typical character in a *hosshin setsuwa* in which she instigates the change toward the Buddhist path. Hotoke embodies buddha-nature more explicitly in her name, but both Giō and Hotoke can be read as embodying buddha-nature because the episode is about their journey and

¹² Elizabeth Oyler, “Giō: Women and Performance in the ‘*Heike Monogatari*,’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 64, no. 2 (Dec 2004), 361.

attainment of buddhahood in the Pure Land. Consequently, their path to the Pure Land is straightforward; Giō and Hotoke are regarded sympathetically since they do not seem to have much autonomy over their lives as *shirabyōshi*. In contrast to their impermanent secular positions, their lives as Buddhist nuns are introduced to the audience as an alternative way of life where rebirth in paradise is viewed as more permanent and worthwhile.

The “Radical” One: Kenreimon’in and the Six Realms

In contrast to the two *shirabyōshi*, Giō and Hotoke, Kenreimon’in is an aristocratic court lady, the daughter of Kiyomori. With the Taira fall, she survives the war and is spared, and is then expected to pray for her dead family’s security in the afterlife as was the convention of medieval Japan.¹³ But more than fulfilling this social obligation, at the end of the *Heike*, in “The Initiate’s Chapter,” Kenreimon’in tells the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa during his visit that her current life experience is comparable to that of experiencing the six realms of the Buddhist world. Furthermore, she recalls her dream where she was at the Dragon King’s palace, and interprets this dream as evidence of the prediction she will be enlightened *soon*. In fact, it is bold for Kenreimon’in to compare her life to experiencing the six realms in the present (human) world. Traditionally, the idea was that one experienced the six realms in a long series of rebirths until one had accrued enough merit to attain enlightenment and transcend the *samsara* of the six realms, the cycle of rebirth. Yet, in Kenreimon’in’s experience, she states that she had experienced all six realms in her current life, which seems inconceivably quick, just like the dragon girl attaining buddhahood in the *Lotus Sutra*. However, unlike the dragon girl, Kenreimon’in does not wish to become a buddha with her own pure land; instead, she prays to be reborn in Amida’s Western Paradise, as do many medieval Japanese of her time. Amida is connected with the Pure Land teachings, and, specifically, Amida’s thirty-fifth vow is dedicated exclusively to saving women.

Thus, I find it interesting that Kenreimon’in references the dragon girl in terms of her possession of esoteric knowledge and of the precedent of a woman attaining enlightenment, but does not seek to completely follow through on the dragon girl’s model. I believe that Kenreimon’in, as an aristocratic court

¹³ Hosokawa Ryōichi, “Kenreimon’in: ama no ikikata,” in *Heike monogatari no onna tachi: dairiki, ama, shirabyōshi* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1998), 145.

lady, might have had more access to some esoteric teachings, but did not ultimately consider herself a manifestation of the dragon girl. Rather, she based her model of enlightenment on a combination of her selected esoteric knowledge with the common knowledge of Amida's Pure Land.

Million Dollar Question: Does It Matter Being a Woman?

The normative understanding of a woman's ineligibility for enlightenment is due to the five obstructions, which necessitates that a woman needs to physically transform into a man first before she can attain the superior state of a buddha. Yet, the dragon girl, as discussed in the first half of this paper, shocks her critics by attaining enlightenment through the power of her wisdom in the *Nāga king* version, and in the *Lotus Sutra* by actual physical transformation. In both cases, the opposing male characters underestimated the dragon girl's ability. Thus, both stories of the dragon girl can be regarded as models for a radical approach to female salvation, whether that be on the basis of profound wisdom or the ability quickly to undergo a physical transformation.

In contrast, the "Giō" episode seems to present a more traditional, literary paradigm for a Buddhist didactic tale. Giō's fortunes fall, and she is at her wit's end, and when suicide is not an option, only then does she consider the life of a nun as the only kind of life left available for her. When she embarks on the Buddhist path, Giō undergoes a spiritual transformation as she becomes less and less attached to worldly concerns and looks forward to rebirth in paradise. This classic tale has a clear Buddhist conversion message that may be more accessible to a wider audience. Though certainly entertaining and illuminating, it might have been difficult for that wider audience fully to understand the esoteric, soteriological teachings of the story of the dragon girl. The idea that a woman could be like the dragon girl seems to be reserved for exceptional beings, not the ordinary person. Even in the *Heike* examples, there is clearly a social status difference between Giō, as a disposable *shirabyōshi*, and Kenreimon'in, as an aristocratic lady. Certainly the difference in their class and upbringing also inferred differences in their access to Buddhist teachings.

Nevertheless, despite the differences in Giō and Kenreimon'in's approaches, they both sought enlightenment as a woman and did not accept the idea that they had to become a man first. In fact, the soteriological problem of their body was never raised in their accounts. Narratively speaking, it seems that it is not essential to be a man in order to be reborn in the pure land. Though other doctrinal teachings may disagree, the sutra examples of the two different

dragon girls and the aforementioned *Heike* examples of two women with different socioeconomic backgrounds underscore that the imagined, literary practice of salvation does not necessarily concern itself with the physical female form, and instead focuses on the spiritual approach to salvation.

Further Study

In further studies, I would like to pursue how the other *Heike* variants would participate in this literary dialogue on Buddhist salvation and women's bodies. I briefly mentioned before that the different variants of the *Heike* provide different insights particularly on the doctrinal interpretation of Kenreimon'in experiencing the six realms. Just from this critical interpretation from the *Kakuichibon* version, the Buddhist interpretation has a significant impact on the differing interpretations of female salvation with regard to the discourse on literature with Buddhist themes and tropes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I combined religious studies and literary approaches to this topic to begin discussion of how medieval Japanese Buddhist soteriological issues for women were perceived and received in literature, and how, in turn, literature participated in the religious discourse. A large part of the convention seems to have been converting the audience through paradigms of didactic tales of women seeking the Buddhist path for a better life. In addition, it is interesting to note that the dragon girl's story was popular to the degree that it was often referenced, even simply in passing, to show a woman's strength and determination of attaining enlightenment when the odds seem to be against her. In some ways, the dragon girl represents an "underdog" story where everyone knows of a woman's limitations according to the dominant Buddhist discourse, and yet the dragon girl defies those limitations imposed by men and attains the so-called "impossibility" for a woman: salvation in a woman's body. Through the examples of Giō, Kenreimon'in, and the two versions of the dragon girl, I argue that the characters' nuanced approaches to salvation not only indicate a difference in intended audience, but also underscore an agreement that the female body was not necessarily considered the obstruction that some normative doctrines taught, and call for reexamination of imagined Buddhist practices in literature.