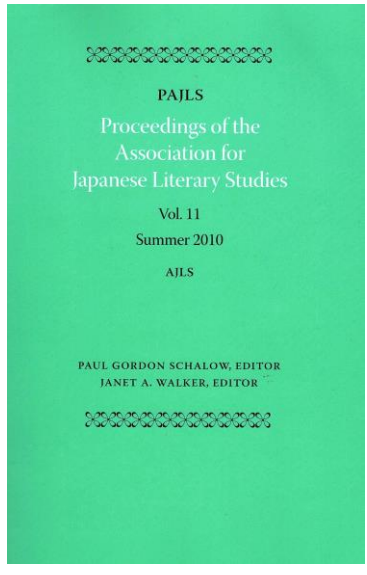
“Kinshi’s Letters: Writing about Women’s Writing, 938 C.E.”

Brian Steininger

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 11 (2010): 199–205.



PAJLS 11:
Rethinking Gender in the Postgender Era.
Ed. Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker.

Kinshi's Letters

Writing about Women's Writing, 938 C.E.

BRIAN STEININGER

Bates College

One of the most striking features of aristocratic literacy in the Heian period is what seems to be a kind of gendered linguistic division. Women writing in *kana* script produced the great vernacular classics like the *Tale of Genji* and the *Pillow Book*, while men did most of their official court writing in bastardized Chinese. The widely-held assumption is that while men also produced considerable vernacular writing, particularly *waka* poetry, women did not have access to the education to read and write Chinese, and were thus confined exclusively to *kana* script and pure Japanese. This summary is perhaps an exaggerated account that few scholars today would support, but it still remains the standard narrative in textbooks and popular histories of the period. The idea of a kind of taboo under which women were discouraged from contact with Chinese script is derived from a few key passages in Heian-period narratives, but has come to play a crucial part in modern cultural history.

However, the historical foundations of this conception are suspect. A recent helpful intervention is Tomiko Yoda's suggestion that this "taboo" be understood as primarily calligraphic rather than linguistic—a response to the establishment of *kana* orthography in the mid-ninth century. Yoda provocatively rereads the early *kana* text *Tosa nikki* 土佐日記 to suggest that it purposefully makes use of a female narrative voice in order to efface the written dimension of Chinese poetry, and thereby enhance the prestige of the vernacular *waka* poetry tradition.[1] We can extend Yoda's argument to think more closely about how women's relationship to writing can function as a narrative or poetic device in individual texts. As Edith Sarra notes in conjunction with her own analysis of *Tosa nikki*, we have to consider the possibility that there is an "overtly programmatic construction of what women's writing could be" at work in these literary texts.[2]

Below I will examine a set of works surrounding a little-studied early-tenth-century figure, Kinshi 勤子 (904–38), Fourth Princess of Emperor Daigo (r. 897–930),

[1] Yoda 2004, pp. 81–110.
[2] Sarra 1999, p. 15.

in an effort to tease out some of the overlooked historical complexities of literacy in the mid-Heian. Though not a prolific writer in any sense, Kinshi was nevertheless an active participant in the court literary sphere. Very little is recorded about her short life, but sometime not long before her death she seems to have married Fujiwara no Morosuke 藤原師輔 (906–60), the scion of Tadahira 忠平, regent to Daigo's son Suzaku (r. 930–46).

Kinshi's death is the subject of a poetic exchange between Morosuke and his sister Kishi 貴子 (904–62) preserved in the final, "Laments" (*aishô* 哀傷) fascicle of the second imperial *waka* collection, *Gosen wakashû* 後撰和歌集:

> Having a letter (*fumi*) from the Fourth Princess [Kinshi], [Morosuke] wrote [this] onto it and sent it to the Mistress of Staff [Kishi].
>
> たねもなき花だにちらぬやどもあるをなどかかたみのこだになからん
>
> *tane mo naki / hana dani chiranu / yado mo aru o*
> *nado ka katami no / ko dani nakaran*
> There are houses where even flowers without seeds do not scatter,
> So why does no wicker basket remain?

Response.

> 結おきしたねならねども見るからにいとど忍の草をつむ哉
>
> *musubiokishi / tane naranedomo / miru kara ni*
> *itodo shinobu no / kusa o tsumu kana*
> Though it is not a seed [she] left,
> As soon as I see it,
> How much more I pluck the Mourning Grass.[3]

The terms of these poems help to outline the status of women's writing in the mid-Heian. Morosuke uses the image of the *katami* ("wicker basket"), which is a homonym with the word for remembrance or keepsake, to ironically contrast the *fumi* (probably letters and poems) Kinshi did leave behind with the children (*ko*) she did not. In this metaphor, Kinshi's writing is something fundamentally unproductive: flower without seed.

Morosuke's concern with reproduction is not unusual, nor is it confined to this exchange. The funerary vow (*ganmon* 願文) Morosuke presented at Kinshi's forty-ninth day rite contains a long passage stringing together laments at her infertility:

> Our time was yet brief,
> But already we knew the joy of the "bear dream;"
> The pine-moss grew firmer,
> And secretly I hoped for the harmony of the "crane's cry."

[3] *Gosenshû* 1392–93.

A dream of a bear was thought to foretell the birth of a male in the Chinese tradition, and young cranes responding to their mother's cry is a familial image from the *Classic of Changes*. Moss that grows epiphytically on pine trees is often used as a symbol for a wife's cleaving to her husband. The passage continues:

> How could I know that
> The jade tree would first wither,
> Forever severed from the hope of another bloom;
> The golden thoroughwort would early fall,
> Suddenly bringing the sorrow of a double devastation.
> In an overturned nest,
> There are no eggs intact;
> In a burned forest,
> How can any flower remain?[4]

Morosuke's language suggests that Kinshi may even have been pregnant at the time of her death.

Read alongside the *ganmon*, Morosuke's *waka* is easily interpreted as another ritual display of grief. However, his choice of metaphor carries heavy associations in the context of *waka* poetry. The description of flowers without seed echoes anxieties found in the *Kokin wakashû* 古今和歌集 prefaces, the most canonical statement on *waka* poetry in the tenth century. These complain that poetry has declined into an instrument of amorous encounters, only "vain songs and empty words" that cannot "bear fruit in serious places." Thomas LaMarre has described this as an allegory of "cultivation" or "domestication of wild growth," that seeks to harness poetry's productive potential into court-prescribed patterns.[5] But there is clearly a gendered element to it as well: the prefaces seek to return poetry to the masculine realm of public ceremony, rescuing it from the dangerous commingling of men and women found in the world of private houses.

Morosuke's metaphor of fruitless flowers therefore has a special resonance in the context of a *waka* poem attached to one of Kinshi's letters. However, there seems to be a paradox of sorts here. At the same time as Morosuke's poem emphasizes the lack of productivity in Kinshi's writing, the *kotobagaki* note preceding his poem suggests that those writings have already achieved a kind of exchange-value. The left-over writings have become the property of Morosuke, something he may edit as he sees fit, but, more importantly, something that can be circulated and exchanged with other members of his circle. Joshua Mostow has argued that Morosuke's personal *waka* collection, which includes numerous exchanges between Morosuke and various imperial princesses, was a means to bolster the prestige of the Fujiwara regency.[6] Rather than simply a denigration of women's

[4] DNS 1:7, pp. 304–5.
[5] LaMarre 2000, pp. 161–63.
[6] Mostow 2004, pp. 1–3.

writing, then, we can see here a kind of alienation effect where writing by women is only valorized at a level once removed from the producer.

The *Gosenshû* itself is part of this process of value-manipulation. This anthology includes large numbers of poems by powerful members of the regency house such as Fujiwara no Tokihira 藤原時平, Saneyori 実頼, and Morosuke, along with their relatives and spouses. The *Gosenshû* was compiled at the Wakadokoro 和歌所, a new office established in 951, and the first head of the office was Fujiwara no Koremasa 藤原伊尹, Morosuke's eldest son. Working under Koremasa were five clerks, and one of them, the State Academy (Daigakuryô) student Minamoto no Shitagô 源順 (911–83), had his own connections to Princess Kinshi. Kinshi's mother Minamoto no Shûshi 源周子 was a cousin of Shitagô's father, and through this tie Shitagô's mother found employment as a lady-in-waiting to Kinshi. For most of his career, Shitagô was closely associated with Kinshi's elder brother Minamoto no Takaakira 源高明.

A few years before Kinshi's death, around 933–34, Shitagô was commissioned by her to produce a dictionary, the *Wamyô ruiju shô* 和名類聚抄 (Collected Encyclopedia of Japanese Names). Shitagô's preface to this dictionary provides an iconoclastic perspective on the status of Chinese script in the mid-Heian and the relationship of aristocratic women to writing. The preface opens with a simple encomium of Kinshi that assembles very standard praise language, all of it associated with aristocratic women:

> Her gentle virtue already stands,
> Her beautiful figure is like a flower.
> The banks of her breast engulf Huyang,
> The shores of her breath enfold Shanyin.

The first couplet is very boiler-plate praise of feminine virtue—the same language can be found in several Liang and Tang-era memorials investing princesses with title or income. The second couplet praises Kinshi by comparison with two Chinese princesses known for their lack of virtue,[7] using images of rivers and lakes to pun off their names. Unlike these inadequate princesses of ancient China, Kinshi is an exemplar of virtue. The language Shitagô selects here is determined almost exclusively by the Princess's title—*naishinnô* 内親王 corresponding to the Chinese *gongzhu* 公主—and thus there is an explicitly gendered component to it. The format is similar to many of the prefaces we see in the eleventh-century *kanbun* prose collection *Honchô monzui* 本朝文粋, for example, but the specific language could never be applied to a male patron.

However, the idiom changes considerably as Shitagô begins to discuss the motivations behind the dictionary's production. First he introduces the Princess's

[7] Princess Huyang, the elder sister of the Later Han Emperor Guangwu, figures as a buffoonish figure in two stories in the Tang-era primer *Mengqiu*. Princess Shanyin, a daughter of the Liu Song Emperor Xiaowu, is even more infamous, having been accused of lasciviousness.

relationship with her father, the recently deceased Emperor Daigo. The emperor gave Kinshi a *zheng* zither (Jp. *sô*) that she quickly mastered, displaying an inborn perceptiveness. However, with the emperor's death in 930, Kinshi put aside musical entertainments. Instead, she found relief in the "amusements of writing and painting." Shitagô goes on:

> Her skill that creates flies with a stroke,
> Could almost mount a folding-screen.
> Her talent that makes the phoenix veer,
> Can also scatter dewdrops.
> Having managed to distinguish the eight styles of writing,
> She already inquires about the myriad names of things.

The line about flies refers to a Three Kingdoms period story about a painter so skilled that flies he painted on a standing-screen were mistaken for real ones by the Wu emperor. "Causing the phoenix to wheel about" and "dripping dew" are terms for calligraphic technique found in several calligraphy manuals. The final couplet quotes from the prestigious Han-era dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 説文解字. In a few lines Shitagô moves from musical accomplishment to parallel feats in painting and calligraphy, and from there to questions of language and script. But along the way the overt gendering of his praise falls away: instead of well-known women calligraphers or musicians, we get gender-neutral terminology or even male exemplars.

This attenuation of overtly feminizing description in a work commissioned by a highly-placed female patron is an indicator of how power relations affect the depiction of gender in Heian works. The adoption of Chinese legal codes in the ninth century led to a drastic decline in political participation by women, and while the aristocratic politics of the tenth and eleventh centuries provided new opportunities for imperial consorts and dowagers to exercise indirect power, the legal distinction between men and women only grew stronger. If we find that Heian *waka* poetry seems invested in an aesthetic that emphasizes the difference between masculine and feminine, it may be related to the fact that imperial anthologies like *Gosenshû* were usually produced under the auspices of powerful aristocratic patriarchies like the Fujiwara clan.

Midway through the preface, Shitagô introduces Kinshi's command ordering the compilation of the dictionary, presenting it as though it were a direct quotation of her words, in a kind of ventriloquism of his patron. This is a very common rhetorical move in classical *kanbun* prefaces, but is interesting here both because of the linguistic cross-dressing it requires in this case, and because of the terms in which Kinshi's demand is stated:

> I have heard
> Those who think to collect the dust will carefully investigate meanings and facts,
> Those who wish to pluck the cassia bough compete in harvesting literary flowers.

> But as for Japanese names, they are abandoned and ignored.
> Therefore, though [I have] 100 cases of the *Scribe's Forest of Words*,[8]
> And 30 fascicles of *Bai Juyi's Encyclopedia*,[9]
> These merely provide amusements of the wind and moon,
> But are inadequate to [resolving] uncertainties about the everyday world.

What is striking about this passage is the absence of the male-female/Chinese-Japanese binary usually projected onto Heian culture. Kinshi wants a dictionary of Japanese names, because the references she has are inadequate—not because they are Chinese, but because they are oriented towards "collecting the dust," a euphemism for achieving high office (through one's learning), "plucking the cassia bough," meaning to pass the civil service examination, and "delights of the wind and moon," a term for poetic composition.

The fact that these terms of bureaucracy, academia, and (*kanshi*) poetry match exactly with the milieu of Shitagô himself—a student in the State Academy—points to the negotiation between tutor and patron behind the dictionary's compilation. What Kinshi seeks instead is information about the quotidian realm of everyday life (*sezoku* 世俗). Shitagô concludes his introduction by echoing Kinshi's command, saying that he has tried to stick to common items, and avoided "multiple synonyms and alternate terms, as well as deep and complex definitions, which might cause inconvenience."[10] For Shitagô and Kinshi, the distinction is not between Chinese and Japanese, or *kanbun* and *kana*, or male and female writing, but rather between the formal composition of the scholar-bureaucrats and the quotidian writing of the rest of society.

In my dissertation research I investigate whether the body of *Wamyô ruiju shô* accords with the principles espoused in its preface. The dictionary's entries typically consist of the headword, a citation of a definition or a usage of the word from a Chinese text, and interlineal commentary noting both the Sinitic pronunciation (*on*) and a Japanese *kun* reading, usually labeled as a "Japanese name" (*wamyô*). While in the preface to the dictionary the realm of everyday, vernacular language is explicitly prioritized, the body of the work hews very closely to Chinese standards of orthodoxy, and vulgar or unorthodox usages appear only subordinately. I conclude that Shitagô's dictionary attempts to bridge the gap between two parallel realms of *kanji*-based literacy in mid-Heian Japan. At one pole is the ideal of elegant *kanbun* writing, aiming for Chinese legibility and read through *kun* readings transmitted in the State Academy. But opposed to this orthodoxy is the widespread and multivalent use of Chinese characters as the local written language: so-called *hentai kanbun* 変体漢文 or *waka kanbun* 和化漢文. This opposition,

---

[8] *Wenguan cilin*, a Tang-era literary anthology in 1000 fascicles compiled under the direction of Xu Jingzong 許敬宗 (592–672).

[9] The Tang-era encyclopedia *Baishi jingshi shilei* 白氏經史事類, more commonly referred to as *Baishi liutie* 白氏六帖.

[10] *Wamyô ruiju shô* Preface 3b.

between two different modes of literacy functioning in parallel in the early tenth century, is the binary organizing the *Wamyô ruiju shô* preface. The gender ramifications of this split are only partial: certainly no women were allowed to train in the Chinese classics at the State Academy, but neither were many aristocratic men.

The *Wamyô ruiju shô* suggests a very different picture of tenth-century literacy, one in which Chinese characters, not *kana,* are the norm, which both men and women might read and write. Of course, there were certainly very significant gaps in the relative saturation of literacy in the male and female aristocratic populations. Nevertheless, we should take Shitagô's description of Heian literacy as a hint to begin to consider to what degree the supposed alienation of women from Chinese writing is an intellectual construct—not just of modern historiography, but of Heian literary works like the *Tale of Genji* themselves. A telling parallel here is the place of China in the prefaces to *Kokin wakashû:* rather than explicitly praising Japanese poetry over Chinese poetry, they work to aggrandize the *waka* tradition by obscuring its Chinese influences as much as possible. Heian women writers are too rarely given credit for this level of self-awareness, but it is worth considering the possibility that *kana* literature in the tenth-century works to establish its own legitimacy by actively effacing or displacing the overwhelming cultural presence of *kanji*-based literacy.

REFERENCES

DNS

Dainihon shiryô. 大日本史料. Tôkyô Daigaku Shuppankai, 1901–.

Gosenshû.

Gosen wakashû. 後撰和歌集. In SNKB 6.

LaMarre 2001

Thomas LaMarre. *Uncovering Heian Japan: An Archaeology of Sensation and Inscription.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

Mostow 2004

Joshua Mostow. *At the House of Gathered Leaves: Shorter Biographical and Autobiographical Narratives from Japanese Court Literature.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.

Sarra 1999

Edith Sarra. *Fictions of Femininity: Literary Inventions of Gender in Japanese Court Women's Memoirs.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Wamyô ruiju shô.

Kyôto Daigaku Bungakubu Kokugogaku Kokubungaku Kenkyûshitsu 京都大学文学部国語学国文学研究室, ed. *Shohon shûsei Wamyô ruiju shô* 諸本集成和名類聚抄. 3 vols. Kyoto: Rinsen Shoten, 1968.

Yoda 2004

Tomiko Yoda. *Gender and National Literature: Heian Texts in the Construction of Japanese Modernity.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.