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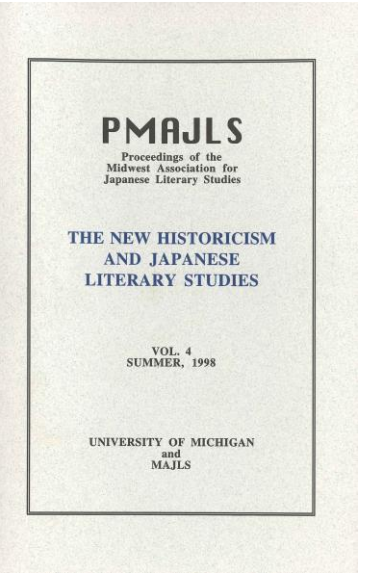
*Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 4 (1998): 199–214.




*PMAJLS* 4:
*The New Historicism and Japanese Literary Studies*.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

# Challenging the Field of Classical Japanese Literature Cultural Production: Iwasa Miyoko's "Through the Eyes of a Court Lady" ("Nyōbō no me")

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When I first read Iwasa Miyoko's "Nyōbō no me", literally "The Eye of a Court Lady"[1] an account of her "court service" as an asobi aite ("humble partner" or "honorable companion", according to Takie Lebra [Lebra, 278]) to the late Teru no miya Shigeko, the eldest daughter of Emperor Hirohito and the eldest sister of the present emperor, I felt as if I were in a time warp. Was tenth/eleventh century omiyazukae (court service), alive and well in the twentieth century? Couched in the highest order of humble and honorific language, it took me back to the glowing praises of imperial mistresses, to Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi*, and to a lesser degree, Murasaki Shikibu's diary. Was it possible for such a legacy to survive the intervening centuries, despite the great political, social, institutional, and economic changes that had occurred? Could this 1988 piece really be a nyōbō nikki (court lady diary)? The sentiment expressed in the diary--Iwasa terms it nyōbō katagi, a kind of court lady code of honor, if you will--appears to be the same, the relationship between court lady and mistress, similar, albeit that of a child companion to a child princess, and very much that of a lady, serving a beloved imperial mistress with unmitigated love and loyalty. All that it lacked was for it to be in classical Heian prose.

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[1] "Me" also includes the meanings of perspective, point of view, vision, and way of life. I thank Toshiko Imazeki for this insight.

So are we to take Iwasa's narrative of nyōbō sanbi (court lady praise of one's mistress) at face value? Perhaps there is no "real" answer, but the question remains: what is the significance of Iwasa's gesture? From the opening passages of "Nyōbō no me" it is clear that these links to the past have been carefully and deliberately forged. Ostensibly, Iwasa describes her experiences as an attendant to Teru no miya, in order to preserve a tradition which is passing into oblivion. Yet if we follow Pierre Bourdieu's lead in examining the structure and operation of what he terms the field of cultural production, we come to read Iwasa's performance as something other than simply reviving an old tradition or seeking camaraderie with ladies-in-waiting of the past. Rather, I argue that, utilizing this short, seemingly nondescript piece which she published privately with her own funds, Iwasa makes a powerful intervention to refigure the field of early classical (tenth through mid-fourteenth century) Japanese literature. By writing "Nyōbō no me" Iwasa challenges the elite critics in the field, contesting their definition of who and what constitutes a writer of nikki bungaku (diary literature) and by extension, who is most qualified to read and interpret nyōbō nikki (court lady diaries). Insights garnered from serving an imperial mistress, she argues, are not merely invaluable but necessary for the study of diary literature and especially of court lady diaries. As one of the few left who has experienced such a life style, Iwasa brings to bear the authenticity and authority of her class and puts herself forward as a "truer" arbiter of diary literature. But, is this just a straightforward case of an outsider challenging the establishment? Iwasa's multiple and contradictory location and Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of them will cause us to reach some surprising conclusions, but let us first turn to Bourdieu and see how a field of cultural production and cultural capital are configured.

In *The Field of Cultural Production* Bourdieu describes the literary arena as possessing an infrastructure and operating as a field of forces in constant motion. The forces in play are the cultural products (novels, plays), the agents who create them (writers, dramatists) and the bestowers of value (critics, editors) who sanction the products (and producers) as works of art (and producers of art). The tasks of the field involve the production and assessment of its products. Needless to say, these judgments are highly contested, and constant jockeying among the participants for the right to make them is the norm. In effect, the more say a player has in determining what and which are the cultural products of the field the more cultural capital (s)he is said to have at his/her disposal. Conversely, the more cultural capital a participant collects, the more honored and revered (s)he becomes.

As Bourdieu has outlined the rules of the game, then, the field is comprised of opposing forces, the most prominent between the dominant, who make the decisions, and the challengers like Iwasa who contest their right to do so. As noted above, the only way a challenger can mount his/her challenge is by acquiring cultural capital. One of the few ways a challenger can do so is by reconfiguring and redefining what counts as cultural production--in other words, by directly challenging the established definitions of the field and those in dominance. In contrast, the task of the dominant class, according to Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, is the employment of reproductive strategies to maintain or increase its assets and position, and, ultimately, to fend off challenges. The reproductive strategies used depend on the volume and composition of the capital to be reproduced and the state of the instruments of reproduction (such as inheritance law, custom, the education system). (*Distinction*, 125) One such instrument, utilized in early classical Japanese literature, is the creation of a hierarchy of

importance among the genres[2] in the field: for example, *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji* ) and, by extension tsukuri monogatari ("fictional tales"), hold top honors, while nikki bungaku (diary literature) come in second or are considered a draw with others in the monogatari tale series such as the poem tale (uta monogatari), the historical tale (rekishi monogatari), or the war tale (gunki monogatari]). The lowest rank is reserved for the setsuwa tales. Poetry collections, despite their prominence during the Heian period, rank lower than *Genji* and slightly below the other major prose pieces--a testament to twentieth century preferences for prose over poetry. Among diary literature a hierarchy is also evident: Heian (chūko) diaries are awarded higher status vis-à-vis Kamakura (chūsei) diaries. As a result, those who have written the so-called definitive commentaries on *Genji* and the Heian diaries command higher positions than other critics. In short, the dominant class then are those doing research on *Genji*, the central Heian diaries, and the important tales. What is of special interest is the presence of a marked gender bias in this hierarchy. The higher ranking *TheTale of Genji* and the Heian diaries, for example, focus more centrally on romantic, love

[2] There is much controversy and disquiet among Japanese scholars as to whether or not genres do exist in Japanese classical literature. Konishi Jun'ichi whose book on Japanese literary history, *A History of Japanese Literature: The Early Middle Ages*, Volume Two, has been translated into English argues strongly that they do, but his view is not widely held in Japan. (Kikuta Shigeo, Personnel Communication, May 15, 1997) Most scholars, however, will agree to the use of such categories as monogatari and nikki, but there is disagreement about how useful these terms are in discussing specific works or in making general statements about the characteristics of each category. Further, in the U.S. postmodernism has ushered in a general disdain of genres and their effectiveness. Cognizant of all these issues, I still feel that the points I am making in this essay are viable and for these reasons I use the term genre, but I do so in its less binding meaning and more in terms of simply indicating general categories of works.

triangles and intrigue. The lesser tales include non-romantic elements such as travel, religious connotations, etc., while the lower ranking Kamakura court diaries read much like "career women" accounts of a day on the job and speak to the everyday lives of court attendants. However, it is no accident, Iwasa claims, that diaries which are more amenable to heterosexual male interest and expertise (e.g., love relations among men and women rather than relationships among women) take precedence over those requiring sensitivity to the workings of a woman's mind in a more straightforward career setting.[3]

Why is this so? Why such a marked gender differentiation in the field? To answer these questions we must take a closer look at how the field of classical Japanese literary cultural production is constituted, where Iwasa and her "Nyōbō no me" fit in--and, ultimately, how effective Bourdieu's configuration of the field is in providing answers to our queries. Bourdieu proves helpful in outlining Iwasa's position on the margins but less so in coming to terms with her gender. Iwasa's life and work are living proof that the creation of cultural capital and authority is much more conflicted and does not simply reproduce a hierarchy of class as Bourdieu would have it. (Bourdieu, *Field*, 7, *Distinctions*, 2) In other words, the field of early classical Japanese literature possesses characteristics which impede Iwasa and her female counterparts in the acquisition of the necessary cultural capital. Most are patronized when they are young; many are harassed as they get older; others are simply ignored.

We ask again, why the gender differentiation? How does it work? Without adequately integrating the consequences his insights have on the function of gender in the constitution of the

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[3] I thank Iwasa Miyoko for this explanation concerning male preferences in diary literature.

field of cultural production, Bourdieu notes that those in dominance can maintain exclusive membership through hidden criteria--that is, through traits held in common beyond requirements explicitly demanded. These "secondary properties", as labeled by Bourdieu, are absent from the official job description but function as tacit requirements. Age, sex[sic] [gender], social or ethnic origin are examples of such operative, unstated principles of selection or exclusion. (*Distinction*, 102-3) The field of early classical Japanese literature utilizes education in such a fashion. On the surface, qualification through education seems egalitarian, but in actuality the system in place in Japan today still privileges men over women. A majority of the most prominent in the field, some would call them the old guard, are graduates of Tokyo University (Tōdai) or students (deshi) of those who have graduated from Tokyo University--which still overselects male over female students. Another prominent "secondary property" is gender. Male candidates are generally given preference over women in the securing of teaching positions. If one is female, even graduating from Tōdai or one of the top women universities such as Ochanomizu University is not good enough to obtain a prestigious post.

Yet the gender card is not the only variable which the Bourdieuian framework leaves unaccounted for. Bourdieu's configuration of the dominant, established class as a monolithic, hegemonic elite in opposition to a separate group of challengers, as noted above, is also too simplistic. For Bourdieu, binaries operate at opposite ends of the continuum and rarely if ever the twain shall meet.[4] Thus Iwasa, as a challenger, must be an

[4] Traditional western thought often insists that the picture be defined as black and white, the selection of one or the other of opposing positions, but feminist scholars of color such as Lata Mani in investigating the position of women have long contended the situation is much more complex. As in the case with Mani's study of sati burning, women often

outsider and should be of lower class. Fundamentally Marxist in orientation, Bourdieu would be puzzled to find a person of upper class origins on the margins of literary studies; Iwasa's access to literacy, to literary works, to the leisure of reading and studying are prerogatives of her class and should guarantee her a more central role. How could this class privilege function as a site of disprivilege?[5] In the field of early classical Japanese cultural production, when coupled with Iwasa's gender and her educational background, it becomes a site of disprivilege. However, at the same time we must not forget that Iwasa's upper class upbringing functions as a site of privilege. In an age when many women were not allowed the luxury of an education, Iwasa was afforded one at a special school set up for female children of the aristocracy in the company of an imperial princess no less. This privilege cannot be underestimated. So we have yet another puzzle and anomaly for Bourdieu--upper class origins can not only serve as disprivilege but at the same time and in the same place function as a privilege. Challengers are outsiders, but they also can share in the prerogative of the dominant. Iwasa's positionality, then, is multi-faceted and contradictory, simultaneously that of privilege and disprivilege, of challenger and of re-inscriber.

But what were the historical and political contexts that transformed Iwasa's upper class status privilege into disprivilege? Little prejudice against the upper class seems operative in the academy, for, as Takie Lebra points out, academia is one of the

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have agency in the exact moments when they are deemed without agency, that both these "states" can co-exist at the same time in the same place. See Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of the Multinational Reception".

[5] I thank Dorinne Kondo for the coining of this phrase and her insightful comments throughout this project.

fields popular among former aristocrats (Lebra 290, 287). Nonetheless, it is a historical fact that aristocrats lost their titles, their positions, and their property after World War II. Again, I am not trying to enshrine them as victims or to suggest that perhaps that should not have been the case, but it is a fact that their class was almost entirely wiped out publicly if not in other ways, and in the aftermath of the Occupation, aristocratic lineage was downplayed. American style education became the great leveler of the playing field and meritocracy and not aristocracy was the name of the game. I am certainly not discounting the effect that this had on opening up the literary field to wider participation. I am simply saying that for the study of classical Japanese women and court lady diaries, the active utilization of the knowledge and insights, gleaned from an aristocratic life style, would have been most instructive.

With the dominant class in early classical Japanese literature configured in this fashion, Iwasa strikes out on all counts. First, her educational profile: She never formally finished college; she attended Gakushūin and acquired the equivalent of what we would now term a high school education.[6] She was privy for a short time to the "Tokyo-style" lectures of one of the great names in the field, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, but a Tūdai graduate this did not

[6] In actuality Iwasa completed "chūgakkō" or middle school which is equivalent to what we would now call high school. To complicate things further the term "chūgakkō" was reserved for schools for boys. Gakushūin for girls was called kōtō jogakkō, as opposed to another system for girls called jogakkō. It was not until 1987 at the age of sixty-one that Iwasa acquired her highest degree, a Doctorate of Literature. (Unlike in the U.S., most in the literary field in Japan begin their careers with a masters degree. Doctorates are not the norm and are often completed at the end of one's career. They are not required to secure a university level post.) Iwasa retired from Tsurumi University in 1997 as a Professor Emeritus (Meiyo kyōju). Iwasa Miyoko, Personal Communication, September 24, 1997.

make ("Poemtale #2", 103).[7] Second, she was female--strike two--and of upper class heritage--strike three. Iwasa even tried a different tack and gained prominence as one of the leading scholars of the Kyōgokuha School of poetry, one of the three major poetic factions that developed during the Kamakura period from the Fujiwara no Teika/Tameie lineage. She wrote seven books, numerous commentaries and articles. She cut her teeth on chūsei nikki and became an expert on court lady diaries. Yet, even these successes garnered her little cultural capital.

Perhaps it is for these reasons that she conceives "Nyōbō no me", a volume about three-fourths the size of a scholarly tome, and decides to take on the "big boys". In the epilogue of the piece, she describes the genesis of the work--it is a slightly modified version of a lecture that she delivered in January 1987 at Tsurumi University. Comprised of just barely over thirty pages, the text consists of a short introduction, five sections, and an epilogue. She begins by wondering aloud, most politely in proper kenjōgo (humble discourse), of course, what the male critics in the field who know little about court service and those born and raised in the post-war years and who have not experienced a hierarchically structured society think about court lady diaries and their code of honor:

> In this day and age when society has lost any understanding of what it means to do court service...--in such an age what do the honorable male scholars and those, both men and women, who have been raised in the post-war years and have not known a hierarchical society think about such a "court lady's code of honor"? (Me, 1; *The translation is mine.*)

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[7] Hereafter, the installments in the series of articles entitled "Poemtale, Court Lady Tale" will be abbreviated to "Poemtale" with the installment number following (e.g., "Poemtale #2) as in this reference.

With this seemingly innocuous question, Iwasa calls upon the authority and authenticity of her class upbringing and her court service--her sites of privilege and disprivilege--to speak out on nyōbō nikki (court lady diaries) as a full-fledged nyōbō (court lady).

And speak out she does. In Section One Iwasa begins by first establishing the credentials of her mistress and, by extension, her class--Strategy Number #1. Princess Teru no miya Shigeko Naishinnō was born on December 1925 as the eldest daughter of the then still Crown Prince, Hirohito. Teru no miya married Prince Higashikuni no miya Morihiro[8] in October 1943, only to be reduced to a commoner after the war. She raises five children and passes away in July 1961 at the youthful age of thirty-five. Born in the same year as the princess, Iwasa serves her from the age of four through sixteen. As one of the few (of sixty classmates) who served the princess most intimately, Iwasa was invited to the princess' home and even went to Hayama Villa during the summers from 1930 to 1937-38 ("Me", 4; "Poemtale #2", 117). Teru no miya was the first royal female child in modern times to acquire an education and she is ultimately sent to pre-school (yōchien) and then to Joshi Gakushūin.

Iwasa's grandmother's May 30, 1930 entry records Iwasa's selection and her first visit to the pre-school. (See entries for June 6 and 13, July 4 and 19 ["Poemtale" #2, 116]). Her early visits to the summer villa in Hayama on July 24 and August 2, 1930, however, are what Iwasa considers to be her first instances of court service. Both visits are recorded by her grandmother, but the uncharacteristically detailed entries speak to the anxiety felt by

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[8] Prince Morihiro by his title "ō" is actually a third generation descendent of an emperor. Children and grandchildren of the imperial family were designated as "Shinnō" for princes and "Naishinnō" for princesses. Iwasa Miyoko, Personal Communication, September 24, 1997.

Iwasa's parents and grandmother that Iwasa do her "job" well. What amazes Iwasa most about the experience is how such a sheltered young child like herself never cried or fussed and executed her "duties" with the greatest of seriousness. ("Poemtale" #2, 117-118).

Iwasa is also careful to point out that her service to the imperial family does not occur in isolation. It is the right and privilege of her class--from Sei Shōnagon and Murasaki Shikibu and through even her father, Hozumi Shigetō. Iwasa's proximity to the princess and her father's service to the royal family are not, however, her only bases of authority--her upbringing is yet another. In "Poemtale #1" she describes the household in which she was raised. Practitioners of law for two generations, the family was, nonetheless, steeped in Meiji liberalism and Edo literature rather than late Taishō/early Shōwa modernism. There was no television. Radio listening was limited to live broadcasts of plays, Kabuki chanting, and ballads, and nightly entertainment consisted of family discussions of drama and literature. The house itself was overflowing with books, stuffed into every nook and cranny. Iwasa notes that she had the run of all the books and that her introduction to literature was eclectic and decidedly non-formal.

A second major strategy Iwasa employs to establish her credentials as a court lady is placing herself in the company of Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon. Like them, she notes, that she received a private or informal (shi-teki) rather than a public (kō-teki) appointment--allowing her proximity to her mistress and explicitly charging her with her mistress' promotion and well-being. (Me, 5).

In the next two sections Iwasa embarks on a discussion of what such service entails. She argues most notably that it is her position as a former court lady which enables her to make startling

revelations about the courts in which Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon served. Iwasa begins her analysis by lamenting that, unlike her time at court, the exchanges between Sadako and Shōnagon were warm, lively, witty. In one such interaction the Empress even goes so far as to call Shōnagon by name, singling her out among her ladies. (Section 278, quoted in Me, p. 13; see Sei Shōnagon, p. 243, for the translation.) Many have dismissed this incident as Shōnagon's grandstanding, and no doubt there is an element of that, but in Iwasa's estimation it is much more: it stands as a depiction of an ideal relationship where both empress and lady could openly express their love and enjoyment of each other. Such a relationship was not possible for Murasaki Shikibu--or for Iwasa. But this was not simply due to a difference in personalities. The standard explanation--that Murasaki, famous for her introverted, darker, ironic view of life, would favor a more subdued relationship, while the extroverted, feistier Shōnagon would relish scintillating, flashier exchanges--is not the entire answer. In what can be called nothing short of brilliant, Iwasa isolates the changes in the political climate as the most influential variable.

Murasaki and Shōnagon are often thought of as contemporaries with no major contextual and historical differences--and in many ways this is on the mark. Iwasa argues, however, that in fact the heydays of these two courts were separated by a critical ten years. Between 993-1000 Sadako was permitted to maintain a showy, attractive salon and to bestow overt favor on one of her ladies. By the time Akiko appeared on the scene in 1008, the political climate was so finely calibrated that the fortunes of the family could not be left in her hands alone. Akiko's father, Fujiwara no Michinaga, could not afford to bank solely on Akiko's charms. ("Me", 13-19. See also "Poemtale #3",

138-42).[9] Thus Iwasa argues that the change in the times had as much if not more to do in the fashioning of the two different pieces and the two different personalities. This "reading" may not sound revolutionary to many, but for those of us in the field, it is striking. Ever since my days in graduate school variances in the prose style, the content, and outlook on life in *Genji* and *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* as opposed to that in *Makura no sōshi* were accounted for solely by the differences in personalities. No doubt this explanation was first formulated in the days of the old New Critics when the individual genius of authors loomed above and beyond any historical, social, or institutional context, but it has taken someone who understands the specificities of court service to show us how limited and limiting that standard explanation has been.

In the final passages of "Nyōbō no me" Iwasa speaks to Teru no miya's "inborn charisma, the birthright majesty of the highborn". ("Poemtale #2, 116) This quality of imperial birthright in Bourdieu's analysis cannot be learned in schools and through external instruction later in adulthood. Instruction in what is the proper way to receive a male guest, the exact shade of vermilion to wear with pale yellow--in other words, the fostering of class "taste"--takes place through observing what Mother does, by simply being in that milieu. Finely calibrated so that it can only be recognized by those in the know, this majesty can easily be

[9] In "Poemtale #3" Iwasa provides three reasons for the differences between the two courts: 1) The times had changed: Michinaga had set up a regent system and could no longer allow Akiko alone to control the court. 2) Emperor Ichijô was now twenty while Akiko was only twelve and he was no longer satisfied with a "fun" court as he might have been while he was younger. 3) There was fierce competition for Ichijō's favor and the right to bear his heir. Michinaga bolstered Akiko's position by surrounding her with men and women of talent and furnishings of the utmost elegance. It is for this reason, Iwasa notes, that Murasaki was prevailed upon to come to court.

dismissed or misinterpreted by those with modern, "bourgeois/non-aristocratic" sensibilities.

In effect, Iwasa reveals herself as one of those raised in the proper class to appreciate Teru no miya's greatness. And it is this ability--nyōbō katagi--that makes her write her diary. With the penning of "Nyōbō no me" Iwasa enters the final stage of her assault on the field of early Japanese cultural production. A good citizen, she had tried to fulfill its requirements through the officially recognized channels of publication. She had even obtained a doctorate in literature. But none of these enabled her to acquire the cultural capital that was her due. She was, in her own words, "one of the ignored". (Iwasa, Personal Communication, May 21, 1997) Perhaps as a last ditch effort, Iwasa decides to utilize experiences that only she and very few today would have in their possession. She responds to the call of her nyōbō heart and writes her own diary. In doing so she, according to Bourdieu's political economy, becomes a producer rather than simply an assessor of cultural products.

No doubt Iwasa's gesture is a powerful challenge to the standing definitions of genre, field--and to Bourdieu's problematic rendering of cultural fields--but can we accept this re-definition? If we do, Iwasa will be credited with having extended the genre into the twentieth century--to have opened the field to the actuality of producers, long thought gone forever, and, ironically, to the danger of enshrining her site of privilege. Nonetheless, the significance of Iwasa's performance is not lost. The possibilities of actually augmenting the genre through production may be limited, but perhaps Iwasa's gesture may open the door for others who share Iwasa's aristocratic, upper class social origins. The field is in dire need of such readings, a field which to date has been dominated by male rather than female readings, good in some aspects but less so in others. It is time that

women like Iwasa be given their full due. But perhaps the greatest significance of her gesture is the opportunity by those in the know to challenge the supremacy of the still largely male elite in this subfield of classical Japanese literature.

In "Through the Eyes of a Court Lady" and her "Poemtale, Court Lady Tale" series Iwasa boldly utilizes the word and spirit of court ladies in her titles and her texts. They have pointed squarely to the complexity, the contradictory, multiple axes of her privilege and disprivilege and to Pierre Bourdieu's problematic constitution of fields of cultural production. It will be interesting to see how the Iwasa challenge plays out and if there will be others who will join her ranks in the assault of the hegemony presently taking place in the early classical Japanese field of cultural production.

In proper postmodern fashion--"Nyōbō no me" is part diary, part treatise, part apology--all challenge.

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