

Formulating a Theory of Women's Writing in 17th-Century Japan: Kitamura Kigin's *Ominaeshi monogatari* [*Tales of the Maidenflower*]

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Conceptual categories are so naturalized into our mental and cultural constructs that they often seem non-constructed and universal, but on further consideration they always reveal themselves to be the products of forces at work within specific cultural and historical moments. Conceptual categories thus have a history. This paper looks at the emergence of a category for "women's writing" in early modern Japan, a category first made explicit in a vernacular prose text (*kana-zōshi*) by Kitamura Kigin (1624-1705) entitled *Ominaeshi monogatari* 1661; *Tales of the Maidenflower*).¹

The belief that there is a discrete category of "women's writing" underlies much of American feminist literary criticism, which in the 1960s and 70s first turned to the problem of defining what made women's discursive practice different than men's. With the advent of postmodern criticism in the 1980s, many critics began to challenge the idea of women's writing for being "essential" and overly "universal." It was argued that critics who used the category failed to distinguish among the diverse positions within the category of "woman" and thus perpetuated an inaccurate description of women's discursive practice. In response to the attack on the category of "women's writing," there was a resurgence of interest in the impact of gender on discursive practice in the late-1980s, fueled by a group of feminist critics who argued the value of maintaining such a category.² These critics articulated, in various ways, a new position (via postmodernism) that attempted to restore theoretical interest to discussions of gender-based discursive difference within feminist literary criticism by proposing a new set of questions. Some placed emphasis on women's lived experience, in specific locales and at specific historical moments, as influencing discursive practice. According to this line of inquiry, women's writing differs from men's to the extent that women's and men's lives differ. Others emphasized women's relationship to language: to what extent do women feel they "own" the language in which they write, and to what extent is it perceived as belonging to men? Finally, still others emphasized the effect of female biology on discursive practice, questioning what impact the body, both as a physical and as a culturally constructed entity, has on writing. Taken as a whole, the new set of questions raised by these critics has succeeded in creating a critical space for inquiry about gender-based differences in men's and women's discursive practice, within and beyond the postmodern critique of the category of "women's writing."

It is in this critical context that I would like to explore the origins of the category of "women's writing" in early modern Japan. My thesis is that in the 17th century a conceptual shift occurred in the way poetry by women was organized and consumed as text. I believe that the shift is correctly associated with a general reorganization of men's and women's roles in Tokugawa society at large.³ The shift, though modest, allowed the Anglo-European categorization of women's writing to be naturalized quickly in Japan in

1. *Ominaeshi monogatari* might best be described, à la Luce Irigaray, as "this text which is not one." Two distinct versions of the text exist, an undated manuscript and the woodblock print edition of 1661, and both are included as examples of the work in Asakura Haruhiko, ed. *Kana-zōshi shūsei* (Tokyo: Tokyōdō, 1987), vol. 8, and in Satō Ritsu, ed. *Ominaeshi monogatari* (Tokyo: Koten Bunko, 1970) vols. 278 and 282.

2. The group includes Nancy K. Miller, Naomi Schor, Linda Alcoff, Diana Fuss, Nancy Hartsock, and Tania Modleski; and, to a certain extent, Teresa de Lauretis and Gayatri C. Spivak, among others.

3. See the essays on early modern Japan in Gail Lee Bernstein, ed. *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

the modern era, as evident in the late 19th and early 20th-century terms for “woman writer,” *keishū sakka* and *joryū sakka*, and the more recent *josei sakka*, all of which hinge on having a concept of women’s discursive practice that is distinct in some essential way from men’s. To put it another way, my thesis is that, while a poem—or even a prose work—by a Heian woman may have revealed insights and perspectives attributable to the fact that its author was a woman whose life and linguistic experience was different than a man’s, and she thus presumably had something different to say in it, that fact alone did not link the work conceptually to every other work by a woman, nor was the work received as the repository of exclusively feminine experience. In a sense, female authorship was erased by this mode of reception.

Female authorship did, of course, attract critical attention in Japan prior to the 17th century. In an article on the *Kokinshū* prefaces comparing Chinese literary treatises to the *mana* preface in Chinese by Ki no Yoshimochi and the *kana* preface in Japanese by Ki no Tsurayuki, John Wixted has noted the following:

Women writers fare poorly in these critical treatises. Speaking of Li Ling and Lady Pan, Chung Hung states that “together they spanned roughly a century; but discounting the [one as a] woman, there was only one poet for the period.” When Yoshimochi describes the decline of earlier Japanese poetry, he states pejoratively, “it became half the handmaid of women, and was embarrassing to present before gentlemen.” And Tsurayuki says of Ono no Komachi, “Her poetry is like a noble lady who is suffering from a sickness, but the weakness is natural to a woman’s poetry.”⁴

The statements in the *Kokinshū* prefaces are typical expressions of the formulaic misogyny of Chinese literary discourse, but I would like to distinguish their abstract negative assessment from the actual placement of women’s poems in the *Kokinshū* sequences, where they stand on an equal footing with those by men. While the formulaic expression of contempt for women’s poetry in the prefaces seems to distinguish women’s writing from men’s based on gender, the structure of the *Kokinshū* reveals no such distinction. And in the centuries afterwards, poetry by women continued to be integrated into the imperial anthologies (*chokusen shū*) and gathered into private collections of poems (*shika shū*) in a way identical to poetry by men. Until the early modern period, gender was missing from among the conceptual categories—season, theme, rhetorical mode, occasion—whereby poetry was constructed as text.

At what point, then, did the identical treatment change? When did the shift occur that put poetry by women into a separate category simply on the basis of the shared gender of the poets? I have chosen here to identify the shift⁵ with *Tales of the Maidenflower*, a 17th-century collection of anecdotes about women poets, with examples of their poems, that has been associated with Kitamura Kigin as either author or editor.⁶ Because *The Maidenflower* is, to my knowledge, the first collection of women’s poetry in Japan, and perhaps in the world, it is of critical interest for our locating the emergence of a Japanese theory of “women’s writing.”

4. John Timothy Wixted, “Chinese Influences on the *Kokinshū* Prefaces,” in Laurel R. Rodd and Mary C. Henkenius, trans. *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 394.

5. Clearly, the conceptual shift was occurring simultaneously in multiple arenas and its traces can be explored in other textual and non-textual sites.

6. Kitamura Kigin’s exact relationship to *Ominaeshi monogatari* has received considerable attention from Japanese scholars, but I have chosen in this essay to focus on other issues surrounding the work. See Nakamura Yukihiro *chojutsu shū*, vol. 5; Watanabe, “*Ominaeshi monogatari kō*” in *Kana-zōshi no kitei*; Moriyama Shigeru, “*Ominaeshi monogatari no shomondai*,” *Kokubungaku* (November, 1961) and “*Ominaeshi monogatari no shōhon ni tsuite*,” *Kokubungaku* (November, 1967); Aoyama Tadaukazu, *Kana-zōshi jokun bungei no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1982).

Kitamura Kigin was a pioneer in making Japan's court literature accessible to people of the emerging Tokugawa urban culture in 17th-century Kyoto, and to a lesser extent in Osaka and Edo.⁷ He had several vehicles for the task: he practiced and taught *haikai* poetry composition in the style of Matsunaga Teitoku (1571-1653), and through it introduced the elite traditions of *waka* and *renga* to a wider audience.⁸ He also produced meticulous commentaries of the court classics, the most famous of which is probably the 60-volume commentary on *Genji monogatari*, the *Kogetsushō* (1673; Commentary of the Lake and the Moon). In addition, Kigin wrote at least three *kana-zōshi*, books in vernacular Japanese, including *The Maidenflower*.⁹ These books served primarily to interpret, in a practical way, some aspect of court literature for the urban readership. Though, later in life, he became tutor to the Tokugawa shogunate in poetry composition and the vernacular classics, Kigin seems always to have had his hand to the pulse of popular culture. It is therefore not surprising that a work like *The Maidenflower* is associated with his name, whether or not he actually authored the work.

Modern literary historians place *The Maidenflower* into a subcategory within *kana-zōshi* of vernacular prose works known as instructional books (*kyōkun sho*), and specifically into a specialized subset of such books designed for the instruction of women (*jokun sho*). Instructional books are generally described as giving the general reader practical knowledge on behavior and manners, and supporting the development of the sort of sound relations among members of society that were considered, in Confucian ideology, essential to maintaining social order. Instructional books thus satisfied the desire of urban men and women to acquire the moral and cultural attainments that would help them better their lives. *The Maidenflower* served to instruct women in building good character through the guided reading of examples of women's poetry from Japan and China. Of the other dozen or so surviving instructional books for women, none focuses on the practice of writing by women as a means of instruction. Nor do they posit poetry by women as a reservoir of feminine experience and sensibility from which women could derive a model of female moral behavior. Moreover, the feminine sensibility constructed in the text is something essential and universal: what an elite court woman in China or Japan wrote centuries ago is presented as a useful model for urban women of Kigin's day to emulate, despite the huge gaps in status and experience.

Writers of these instructional books were generally scholars or courtiers in the capital who, from poverty or aristocratic largesse, were willing to write down their cultural and moral wisdom for a popular audience. Since the task involved a figurative writing "down" as well, instructional books generally share a tone of sincere condescension. The condescension is especially apparent in *jokun sho*, where male Confucianists are writing for an audience of women. Ironically, this male act of writing "down" was crucial to achieving the conceptual shift that brought the gender-based category of "woman writer" into being, for it made the woman poet visible for the first time *as a woman*.

Briefly, the controversy revolves around whether Kigin authored the compilation, or simply had a hand in revising an existing work. Scholarly opinion seems divided: Kigin is cited as author [*chosakusha*] in the entry for "Kigin" in the authoritative *Nihon koten bungaku daijiten* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1984), vol. 2, p. 113; but the entry for "*Ominaeshi monogatari*," in the same encyclopedia dates the work from the Bunroku-Keichō eras (1592-1615), and cites the author as unknown (vol. 1, p. 517); the entry then describes Kigin's role as that of editor/compiler [*hensha*] of the 1661 woodblock print edition.

7. See Thomas J. Harper, "The Tale of Genji in the eighteenth century: Keichū, Mabuchi and Norinaga," in C. Andrew Gerstle, ed. *18th Century Japan: Culture and Society* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 106-123.

8. Kigin has the distinction, too, of having been an early teacher of *haikai* composition to Matsuo Bashō (1644-94). According to Donald Keene, it was Kigin who instilled in Bashō a life-long "care in the use of [poetic] language." Keene, *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-modern Era, 1600-1867* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1976), 74.

9. The others are *Kana retsujo den* (1655) and *Iwatsutsuji* (1676). They are included in supplementary volumes to a multi-volume facsimile collection of Kigin's classical commentaries, *Kitamura Kigin kochūshaku shūsei—betsu* (Tokyo: Shintensha, 1980).

The Maidenflower is made up of approximately 55 discrete episodes, depending on the version of the text.¹⁰ Consistent with the sincere condescension and Confucian didacticism that typifies instructional books, the compiler selected poems that illustrated the moral points he wanted to make. That meant ignoring vast numbers of poems that contradicted those points. The opening episode, for example, is a call for sexual chastity. It quotes two poems, one by the lady Shinzaemon and another by the lady Shimotsuke, in which the women reject the romantic advances of men. Episode 1 then concludes: "These two ladies are exemplary for their spirit of chastity [*kokoro yasashiku*]; all women should seek to carry themselves [*mi o motsu beki*] in this manner" (16). The many poems in the *waka* corpus expressing a woman's assent are conveniently ignored.

Episode 37 tells the well-known story of Lady Wang, consort to emperor Han Yüan-ti, who was so confident of her beauty that she failed to pay a bribe to the court painter commissioned to do portraits of the emperor's ladies. His portrait depicted her as quite plain, and the unfortunate result was that she was selected from among the emperor's numerous concubines as a good-will gift to be sent to a barbarian king. The text makes of Lady Wang a model of female arrogance, and contains a poem that expresses how she was made to suffer for it. The episode then concludes: "It has been said, 'A woman's obedience to a man is like water in a container.' If the container is small, she is small. If it is round, she is round. Therefore, if a woman is clearly not obedient [*sunao*], she should work to cultivate that trait [*tashinamu beki nari*]" (87).

Episode 53 is somewhat less dogmatic. The episode begins with the statement: "For a woman to drink liquor is undesirable," and lists several ways in which a woman's drunken display is thought to be especially unseemly, but the text then moves to modify the earlier statement: "Women should drink in moderation [*yoki hodo ni*]." The idea of moderation is illustrated by a poem. The text then elaborates: "It is not acceptable [for a woman] to avoid liquor completely and shirk social interaction just because drunkenness is bad; when drinking, do so in moderation so as to avoid intoxication." The episode then concludes, "Taken in moderation, liquor is medicinal; but it loses its effect if you drink until you are sobbing drunk [*shikushiku to yoinaki suru hodo*]. Women ought therefore to make allowances and drink only in moderation" (113-115). Not exactly a model of consistency, but the episode conveys its point.

Not every episode in *Tales of the Maidenflower* attempts to put limits on women's behavior, however. On the contrary, there are several episodes in which historical discursive practice by women presents liberating possibilities for contemporary women. Episode 42 is one such example. The episode begins: "One never hears lately of women who compose linked verse [*renga*]. It does not require as much practice as writing poems, and there is nothing wrong with composing impromptu linked verse for one's own pleasure." The text next describes three examples of female poets (Izumi Shikibu, Sagami no haha, and Shigeno no naishi) who extemporaneously capped men's verses. The episode then concludes, "Since these precedents exist, is it not acceptable [*kurushikaranu koto ka*] for women to compose linked verse?" The rhetorical question with which this episode concludes is unusual in its unassertiveness, and its use may indicate that the compiler was aware that this sort of liberating use of poetic precedent might not sit well with a strictly orthodox Confucian view of women's discursive role. The fact that the text constructs a model for the present on the basis of past discursive practice in ways that are both confining and liberating—reveals complexity and even ambivalence about the role of women.¹¹

Interestingly, the compiler of *The Maidenflower* signs himself as "a woman of the Fujiwara clan" (*Fujiwarashi no onna*), as if the anecdotes were being compiled not only for women, but by a woman as well. We can only speculate what he had in mind when

10. In the following discussion, page numbers refer to the modern print version of the National Diet Library *shahon* text in Satō Ritsu, ed. *Ominaeshi monogatari: honkoku hen* (Tokyo: Koten Bunko, 1970) vol. 282.

11. Compare *The Maidenflower* to a text such as *Onna daigaku* (1716; *The Greater Learning for Women*), which is more dogmatic and authoritarian in its formulation of what women ought and ought not to do discursively.

he adopted a female authorial persona. In my reading of it, the text neither maintains the female persona nor particularly reflects a female voice. Certainly the emphatic *beshis* and *nakares* with which the episodes are peppered have an authoritative quality usually associated with masculine discourse. The phenomenon of literary transvestism is observable in Japan as early as Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa nikki* (c. 935; *Tosa Diary*).¹² In that case, the male writer's decision to identify himself as a woman was primarily a product of "kana envy." Since the vernacular script was gendered as female, men who wanted to write in Japanese had no choice but to abandon Chinese and adopt *kana*; this meant taking on the femininity (or perhaps simply non-masculinity) that was associated with the vernacular script.¹³ In the case of *The Maidenflower*, the compiler's signature as "a woman of the Fujiwara clan" may have been an acknowledgement of both the gendered nature of vernacular script and of the legacy of Fujiwara women's discursive power associated with that script.

Kigin's project in *The Maidenflower*, where the poetry of women was divided from the overall *waka* poetic corpus into a discrete category based on gender, parallels his project 15 years later in another vernacular text, *Iwatsutsuji* (1676; *Wild Azaleas*),¹⁴ where love poems exchanged between Buddhist priests and their young male acolytes were divided from the overall *waka* corpus to produce a collection of male homoerotic love poetry. It, too, essentializes and universalizes the love of man for youth simply on the basis of the genders of the writer and recipient of the love poem. In that sense, *The Maidenflower* and *Wild Azaleas* represent complementary projects, for, in each, Kigin constructs a gender-based category where none had existed before: one was the category of "poems by women," the other was the category of "poems inspired by homoerotic desire." In *The Maidenflower*, the effect of implicitly distinguishing the category "woman poet" was, almost inadvertently, to make women's discursive practice visible for the first time as distinct from men's. The act of distinguishing a writer as a "man" or "woman" has certain pitfalls, which include the potential for using such a distinction to segregate women's writing from the larger literary discourse, but "women's writing" as a category also has the positive potential to promote the status and visibility of women's writing. And the history of that category in Japan seems to have begun with a modest conceptual shift that occurred somewhere in the divide separating "early modern" from "medieval" Japan.

12. See Lynne K. Miyake, "The *Tosa Diary*: In the Interstices of Gender and Criticism," in Paul G. Schalow and Janet A. Walker, eds. *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

13. The gendered aspects of the vernacular language in Heian discourse are well analyzed by H. Richard Okada in *Figures of Resistance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

14. See my study and translation in "The Invention of a Literary Tradition of Male Love: Kitamura Kigin's *Iwatsutsuji*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 48:1 (Spring 1993), 1-31.