

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Courtly Visions: The Ise Stories and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation*

By Joshua S. Mostow

Brill, 2014  
350 pages.

Reviewed by Roberta STRIPPOLI



*Courtly Visions* is a remarkable exploration of the ways *Ise monogatari* (*The Ise stories*, also known as *The Tales of Ise*, tenth century) has been reinterpreted, alluded to, used, or more simply, appropriated by various individuals and groups over the course of the centuries following its creation.

Beautifully printed on glossy paper, with 171 illustrations, most of which are in large size and color, of a variety of materials from libraries, museums, temples, and private collections, *Courtly Visions* stands out as a handsome object. With its extended, detailed analyses of both written text and illustration, it is geared to a readership conversant in art history, but also to Japanese poetry experts, and to everyone interested in broader issues such as gender and reception theory.

It is impossible to do justice to such a rich work in a thousand-word review. *Courtly Visions* endeavors to shed light on the visual reception of both text and illustration of one of the most “received” works in the history of Japanese literature and art. *Genji monogatari* and *Heike monogatari* are the only works whose reception can be compared to that of *Ise monogatari*. *Ise monogatari* was appropriated by artists and audiences that were at times quite different from the people it was originally intended for. Where do the pictorializations come from, and how can we make sense of them? What audiences are the images appropriating *Ise monogatari* for? How do the tales function in the disparate contexts behind the different productions?

At the core of the book is Mostow’s analysis of the three oldest extant versions of *Ise monogatari*, whose originals were supposedly created around the same period, the thirteenth century. The fact that the three works (the first two are fragments; the third is an eighteenth-century copy) are so strikingly different shows that multiform appropriations were already fully developed at the time. Mostow examines the first of them, *Hakubyō Ise monogatari emaki dankan*, in chapter 2. This is a text whose terse black and white images betray special attention to the feelings of the female characters and the interest of a female audience. Women who proactively gaze at men, visual expressions of female desire, frontal views of the handsome and courtly-elegant male protagonist are seen in the *Hakubyō* illustrations. The *Ise monogatari*, a male-authored text, is here reinterpreted for the benefit of female readers. The second text, the *Izumi-shi Kubosō Kinen Bijutsukan Ise monogatari emaki*

or, more simply, the *Kubo* version, a highly ornamented, professionally produced text that looks extremely different from the *Hakubyō*, is examined in chapter 4. “Its very opulence, as well as the apparently dedicatory function of some of its under-paintings, encourage us to interpret it as a highly political work, created by a decidedly political entity and designed to be given to another such entity” (p. 127). The *Kubo* version shows how the *Ise monogatari* was used by courtiers as a “repository of cultural capital” not only to establish their superiority towards the shogunate, but also towards other courtiers. In this case, it served to promote the senior line of the imperial household, to which Retired Emperor Fushimi (1265–1317) belonged. The third text is *Ihon Ise monogatari emaki*, examined in chapter 6, a version that has been connected with possible tantric readings of *Ise monogatari*. Mostow argues against this interpretation, indicating that this is actually a Muromachi-period text, not a thirteenth-century text, and pointing to the oft-neglected wit and humor that inform the illustrations of the scroll.

Among the interesting and meticulously researched topics this book brings up is “The Love Song of Lord Takafusa” (chapter 3, translated in full in the appendix) in which courtier Fujiwara no Takafusa (1142–1209) appropriates material from *Ise monogatari* to express his disappointment over the loss of his beloved Kogō, a lady who appears prominently in *Heike monogatari* and who becomes a consort of Emperor Takakura. In particular, Takafusa makes use of the triangular relationship between Narihira, a woman named Takaiko, and Emperor Seiwa, as told in episode sixty-five of *Ise*, to describe his feelings. Takafusa’s romantic claims over an imperial consort may sound quite surprising, considering that Kogō and Emperor Takakura were alive and together when the love song was composed. (An interesting explanation for why the court would not perceive this as insulting for Emperor Takakura is given in the chapter.)

The book offers correctives to a number of theories. For example, chapter 1 argues that the *Ise monogatari* poems did not originate from pictures, as some scholars have suggested. Chapter 6 propounds, as I have mentioned, that *Ihon Ise monogatari* was not created in the thirteenth century; nor was it connected to tantric reading practices. Chapter 7, one of the most compelling in the book in my opinion, shows how the printed *Saga-bon Ise monogatari* of 1608 does not reflect an already standardized iconography, but, on the contrary, creates a brand new one. The large distribution of the *Saga-bon* influenced the *Ise*-related cultural production of the Edo period and beyond. Chapter 8 focuses on the creation of a completely distinct *Ise* iconography, that of Tawaraya Sōtatsu (fl. 1600–1630) and his atelier, that would later be identified as Rinpa style. “It is these two iconographies,” concludes Mostow, “that would dominate *Ise* imagery into the modern period, with the *Saga-bon Ise* being reprinted continuously ... and forming a solid component of every early modern Japanese persons’ ‘cultural literacy.’” At the same time, “the *Ise* remained a significant source of topoi for the Rinpa school, an artistic style that would in the twentieth century come to be seen both locally and internationally as ‘typically Japanese,’ the quintessence of a Japanese aesthetics” (p. 241).

*Courtly Visions* is a fascinating journey through appropriation, reinterpretation, and canonization, and is an important, far-reaching contribution to the field. The author is to be commended for his extraordinary knowledge of *Ise monogatari*, of Japanese traditional poetry, and of the complicated circumstances that inevitably surround every act of visual representation.