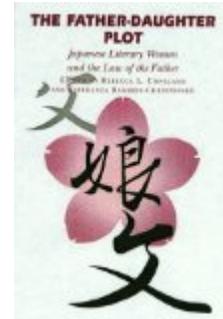


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The Daughterly Experience of Japanese Women Writers

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This volume of twelve essays on the father-daughter relationship in Japanese literature is an extension of a panel for the Association of Asian Studies called “In the Shadow of the Father: Literary ‘Patriarchs’ and Japanese Women Writers” and a day-long conference at Harvard University entitled “(Un)Dutiful Daughters: Modern Japanese Female Writers and Their Cultural Fathers,” together with a few other solicited contributions. Famous literary daughters abound in the Japanese tradition, from well known modern writers such as Koda Aya, Tsushima Yuko, and Yoshimoto Banana, to canonical women writers from the distant past such as Murasaki Shikibu, whose grandfather, Masatada, had several of his poems included in the second imperial poetry anthology, while her father, Tametoki, continued the family’s long tradition of scholarship on and study of the Chinese classics. The baffling thing, perhaps, is that hardly anyone has ever thought to take up the topic of literary daughterhood before. Indeed, as Copeland notes in the “Preface” and Ramirez-Christensen observes in the “Introduction,” the father-daughter relationship has been little studied in any national literary tradition until quite recently, and so it can be hoped that this book on Japanese literary daughters and the Law of the Father will have some impact outside of the field of Japanese literary studies in the English-speaking world.

“The Law of the Father,” Ramirez-Christensen re-

minds us in the “Introduction,” “is the Lacanian generic term for the laws–prohibitions, injunctions, rituals, institutions—that structure and give coherence to culture” (p. 6). In psychoanalytic theory, the Law of the Father has always had at least two explanatory functions: to describe, by means of the family romance and the father’s prohibitions and threat of castration, the gradual organization of the libidinal drives and the making of the human subject; at the same time, the father’s injunctions in his home are a reflection and reproduction of the Law in patriarchal society. The latter use of the Law of the Father is possible because the father is the major representative of the patriarchal order in the family.

A little more than half of the essays in the volume focus on actual, biological father-daughter relationships and on representations of the father in literary texts, while the remaining essays make productive use of the Law of the Father as metaphor by examining women’s negotiations with people we can call “cultural fathers,” those men who largely control the levers of literary production and reception, and thus determine which literary daughters get published and to a large extent how warmly they are received. Equally important is the influence exerted by these cultural fathers on the actual writings of Japanese women.

What is so interesting in regard to the extended, metaphoric use of the Law of the Father is the way foreign texts can potentially empower a daughterly rebellion against the native cultural fathers. This is at least

touched on in contributions by Sharalyn Orbaugh on Oba Minako, Atsuko Sakaki on Kurahashi Yumiko, and Midori McKeon on Ogino Anna. In her essay “Ogino Anna’s Gargantuan Play in *Tales of Peaches*,” Midori McKeon shows that, while Japanese writers such as Sakaguchi Ango certainly exerted influence on Ogino, far more significant was the power of Rabelaisian comedy on this daughter of a Japanese artist of Western painting and a French-American sea captain. The literary daughter of Francois Rabelais gains the power to overturn the conventions of the Japanese *shosetsu*, especially “in her decision to eschew realistic portrayals of romance or entangled emotional issues related to man-woman relationships” (p. 353). In “Oba Minako and the Paternity of Maternalism,” Sharalyn Orbaugh investigates the kinds of “paternity” or “fatherhood” that produce the “mother-as-subject” in Oba’s texts. Orbaugh looks at two kinds of literary paternity, which she calls “external” and “internal.” The latter refers to representations of the father in Oba’s fiction, while the former refers to the cultural fathers who influenced her writing and mediated her entrance into the literary world. Orbaugh sees Franz Kafka as a decisive, shaping influence on Oba’s writing; here is a European cultural father who the Japanese critics, men “perplexed, disturbed, and yet still profoundly impressed” by Oba’s writing (p. 285), either overlook or assign little significance. For her essay “Kurahashi Yumiko’s Negotiations with the Fathers,” Atsuko Sakaki painstakingly researched the reception of her author among many prominent critics. In contrast to Oba Minako, Kurahashi was not warmly received by the male critical establishment when she began her career in the 1960s. Early on, we learn, Kurahashi was scolded for the way she too revealingly (from the perspective of male critics, that is) appropriated and rewrote French author Michel Butor in her *Blue Journey* of 1961, to take just one example. Later in her career she would also appropriate, rewrite, and parody her Japanese literary forebears and contemporaries, thus garnering a reputation as an unruly Japanese literary daughter.

The situation is somewhat different with Hayashi Fumiko, one of the most popular writers in Japan in the late 1920s and 1930s. In her wonderfully titled essay, “De-Siring the Center,” Janice Brown observes in Fumiko’s writings “a steady stream of references to and critiques of male writers” (p. 143), but a nearly complete lack of attention given her female contemporaries in the literary world. Brown attributes this to Fumiko’s insatiable “hunger” for the literary center, that is, for literary recognition and the chance to write from the male position.

But Brown also shows how Fumiko usurps this masculine position and introduces themes of gender difference absent from the writings of her cultural fathers. Here again, even though writers like Tokuda Shusei and the modernist poets were inspirational to Fumiko, so too was the Norwegian Knut Hamsun, whose 1890 *Hunger* (translated into Japanese in 1921) was a powerful influence on Fumiko when she was writing *Diary of a Vagabond* (1928-30). However, unlike Ogino and Kurahashi, this does not really engender a daughterly rebellion per se, since Hamsun’s work was inspirational to a whole generation of male Japanese writers; Fumiko’s appropriation of Hamsun, then, reinforces for us her desire to conquer the canonical center and her identification with her male contemporaries.

In all honesty, this does not even begin to exhaust the richness of these essays, but the empowering possibilities of foreign literature is one very intriguing thread that can be traced through several of the contributions to this volume. It is fascinating how in the modern period Japanese women’s appropriation of literature from around the world and their adoption of Euro-American cultural fathers so often invites strong reactions, from bewilderment to downright hostility, from male Japanese critics. The implication of several of the essays is that the intimate knowledge of foreign literature is a closely guarded male preserve that does not easily brook female transgression. In many cases, it seems that Japanese women writers are supposed to find inspiration elsewhere, usually in the Japanese literary heritage itself. Rebecca Copeland’s recent book on Meiji women writers, for example, clearly shows how Western literature was a domain of male inquiry, whereas women writers were supposed to be the keepers of the Heian tradition.[1] The idea of female disenfranchisement from some privileged sphere of male inquiry makes for an interesting juxtaposition of some of these essays on modern women writers with Joshua Mostow’s discussion of women and Chinese learning in Heian Japan. In his essay “Mother Tongue and Father Script,” Mostow does a good deal of spadework in order to uncover the fact that some women in the Heian period were expected to know Chinese as part of their duties, although certainly women in general were gradually excluded from the world of Chinese letters. Mostow documents the different ways of challenging this disenfranchisement by two contemporaries, Sei Shonagon and Murasaki Shikibu. Sei routinely exhibits her knowledge of Chinese letters (while scrupulously avoiding any appearance of bookishness) in her exchanges with male courtiers in a sexually charged

game of one-upsmanship. Murasaki was more demure, preferring a much more discreet use of her knowledge of Chinese letters in the service of *kana* fiction and poetry. Mostow goes on to demonstrate how the attitudes of these two famous literary women toward Chinese letters reflect political struggles in the competitive salons of the Empresses Shoshi and Teishi.

Let me turn now to the essays that focus on biological father-daughter relationships. One issue common to all of the texts examined in this second group of essays, whether purely literary-fictional or more autobiographical, is the problem of representation, especially the idealized representation of the father. However, representation of the father as an ideal figure always runs up against the painful fact of patriarchy, which often leads to cases in which the authority of the father is subtly challenged or the ideal itself is transformed. Sonja Arntzen, in her “Of Love and Bondage in the *Kagero Diary*,” demonstrates that the *Kagero* memoirist’s representation of her father moves from an idealized portrait of unconditional love, which effaces the political maneuvering behind her marriage to Fujiwara Kaneie, to a portrait of a real and fallible person, which thereby acknowledges her father’s complex sociopolitical position. During this process, the author achieves a modicum of emotional independence and freedom of mind. In “Self-Representation and the Patriarchy in the Heian Female Memoirs,” Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen offers a close reading of the eleventh-century *Sarashina Diary*, among other texts. She points to the depiction of a strong emotional bond between Sugawara Takasue and his daughter, an inevitable representation perhaps, since daughter and father “stand and fall together in the socio-political structure” (p. 74); but barely repressed by this representation of loving dependence is the father’s role in frustrating the daughter’s ambitions in life, a dynamic that threatens to collapse the idealization of the father in the daughter’s text. In “*Towazugatari*: Unruly Tales from a Dutiful Daughter,” Edith Sarra observes that her subject, Lady Nijo, records her father’s urging that she continue the family’s literary tradition and his admonishment that should she ever incur the displeasure of her lord, Retired Emperor Gofukakusa, she should take Buddhist vows and become a nun. Lady Nijo structures her narrative in such a way that she follows her father’s dying wish that she continue the literary heritage of the family, but the text she produced is “unruly” because it simultaneously highlights the various plots concerning her erotic destiny instigated by her father and her “surrogate father,” Gofukakusa.

Essays on representations of the father among modern women writers—including Tomoko Aoyama on Mori Mari, Eileen Mikals-Adachi on Enchi Fumiko, Rebecca Copeland on Uno Chiyo, and Ann Sherif on Koda Aya—continue to grapple with the conjoined problems of representation and idealization from different angles. In her essay “A Room Sweet as Honey,” Tomoko Aoyama observes that Mori Mari, daughter of Mori Ogai, wrote idealistically of the “long, long happy days” with her famous father, but at the same time stages scenes of “daughterly revolt” by critiquing her father’s fiction for its lack of certain essential characteristics. In her essay on Enchi Fumiko, subtitled “Female Sexuality and the Absent Father,” Aileen Mikals-Adachi demonstrates that Enchi’s texts, which are famously spiteful of patriarchy, work to idealize the representation of her father by forever keeping him textually apart from the patriarchal order. In her essay “Needles, Knives, and Pens,” Rebecca Copeland traces the transformation in the Uno heroine’s representation of the father from an oppressive tyrant against whom literary discourse itself constitutes a kind of resistance into “a gentle spirit who becomes the very object of the daughter’s desire” (p. 218). In “A Confucian Utopia,” Ann Sherif examines Koda Aya’s relationship with her famous father, Koda Rohan, and Koda’s representation of this relationship as “a utopian vision of the family, a unified moral and aesthetic realm that is an alternative to the despair at the failed patriarchy and matriarchy expressed in the texts of many of Koda’s contemporaries” (p. 238).

No matter how many unifying threads a reviewer locates, the richness of individual essays will never be sufficiently emphasized. No doubt scholars who work on any of the individual authors represented in this volume will find many productive ideas for their own research. No doubt, too, specialists in one period or another will find suggestive avenues to pursue. Certainly the essays by Sherif and Ramirez-Christensen stake out intriguing new theoretical terrain that can be used by others to explore a great variety of texts: Ramirez-Christensen’s fascinating essay reflects a full-scale engagement with psychoanalytic theory, especially in its Kristevan inflection; Sherif’s excellent essay points to the limitations of the Freudian hermeneutic for the study of Japanese literary daughters and critiques the easy association of the Law of the Father with oppression.

Convention has it that a review end with criticisms, but in truth I have few to offer. The essays are all pleasingly ambitious and of uniformly high intellectual quality. The one major criticism I have concerns the glaring lack of attention paid to women writing between the

early fourteenth century and the 1920s. This book perpetuates the mistaken impression, held by many students of Japanese literature, that women were not writing during this huge span of time. Essays on the Edo-period poet-painter Ema Saiko or on some of the Meiji women writers would have added much to the impact of this volume. But even this criticism is somewhat unfair, since the book does not pretend to offer comprehensive cover-

age. Instead, it seeks to open new roads for the study of Japanese literature and succeeds brilliantly in this enterprise.

Note

[1]. Rebecca Copeland, *Lost Leaves: Women Writers of Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000).

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