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BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS



The Sarashina Diary

A Woman's Life in Eleventh-Century Japan

Sonja Arntzen and Itō Moriyuki,
translators.

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
PRESS, 2014
264 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0231167185,
HARDBACK

Reviewed by Fay Beauchamp

The *Sarashina Diary: A Woman's Life in Eleventh-Century Japan*, translated with excellent notes and short essays by Sonja Arntzen and Itō Moriyuki, gives a perfect opportunity to consider the significance of Sugawara Takasue no Musume's "personal story."¹ From the generation after the great luminaries Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon, the young Takasue no Musume prayed "with abandon" to be able to read more tales of the "Shining Genji."² Takasue no Musume had quite the chance to be successful at court and at authorship. She was related to the Imperial family through her Fujiwara mother, to Murasaki Shikibu through her stepmother, and to the great poet and statesman Sugawara no Michizane through her father, Takasue. Takasue no Musume was no ordinary woman. Yet this "diary" presents her as ordinary—in the same way as Charlotte Brontë or Jane Austen personally appear ordinary. All three women were entranced with lives of passion, wealth, and power, yet their imaginations transcended their own ability to be heroines of romance.

Before trying to analyze what Takasue no Musume's life signifies, one needs to discuss the work that Arntzen and Itō present. They begin with an essay about the genre *nikki*. Commonly translated as "diary," the English term implies an autobiographical record, written in intervals in the past; English speakers may expect a primary text untampered by retrospective revision either by the author or another. This work, however, has

As a girl raised in the back of beyond, even farther than the end of the road to the East Country, how rustic and odd I must have been. But however it was that I first became enthralled with them, once I knew that such things as tales existed in the world, all I could think of over and over was how much I wanted to read them.

—The beginning of *The Sarashina Diary*,
as translated by Arntzen and Itō, 90.

been reshaped in a way that an autobiography shapes the past. Ivan Morris's 1971 translation³ uses the word "recollections," and Richard Bowring (1982) calls *Sarashina Nikki* a "memoir."⁴ If one wants to establish Takasue no Musume's literary reputation, such shaping and patterning are virtues. But in order to judge the quality of an elite woman's life in eleventh-century Japan, one must evaluate whether a text reflects the life or how the author or someone else thought the life should be viewed.

Along with earlier Japanese critics, Arntzen and Itō emphasize a movement in the text from infatuation with fiction to religious awakening. Arntzen and Itō highlight periodic correspondence with an unnamed nun, dreams of Amaterasu, and apologies for wanting worldly happiness and success; they state, "The main narrative line undeniably describes a process of disillusionment."⁵ In my own reading of this translation, however, Takasue no Musume appears much more genuinely and deeply engaged with *The Tale of Genji* than with Shinto or Buddhist beliefs.

Takasue no Musume, of course, may have added pious sentiments in revising her text, but there is also another candidate: the scholar, poet, and friend of the Sugawara family, Fujiwara no Teika.⁶ Arntzen and Itō point out that the Sarashina District contains "Obasuteyama," or "Old Forsaken Woman Peak," where in times past old widows, etc., were abandoned to die. On the last pages, the widowed old Takasue no Musume writes,

*Not even the moon has / emerged in the darkness deepening over
/ Old Forsaken Woman Peak. / How is it then, that you [a lone
nephew] come visiting this night?*

Arntzen and Itō admire the literary circular pattern where Takasue

no Musume leaves the Sarashina area as a child and then refers to the district's gloomy mountain at the end. But when the scholar Fujiwara no Teika created the only known copy, he was the one who called it *Sarashina Nikki*. He might have been the one to add the very last lines of the diary, "please imagine / the dense grasses in the garden / of final renouncement."⁸

Why should a reader be skeptical of such an ending? It is reminiscent of later totally invented legends that the ninth-century female poet Ono no Komachi ended a wanderer, old, wretched, and mocked. *The Sarashina Diary's*



The Uji River—not quite a "Bridge of Dreams." Photo by reviewer.

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The Sumiyoshi Shrine as envisioned in *The Tale of Genji*. Source: Murase, Miyeko. *The Tale of Genji: Legends and Paintings*. New York: Braziller, 2001. (The Burke Album, c. 1550, illustration for Genji, chapter 14.)

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ending also reminds me of the ending of *The Tale of the Heike*, when Kenreimonin, a truly forsaken widow and Buddhist nun, poignantly received one rare last visit from a relative. Kenreimonin died in 1213, centuries after Takase no Musume, but at the same time Fujiwara no Teika made the only known copy of *Sarashina Nikki* (c. 1210–1215). Teika could have been affected by Kenreimonin's heartbreaking story of loss.

What else, then, does this retrospective diary reveal about Takasue no Musume's life? Her joy lay in tales. Her stepmother told her fresh stories from *The Tale of Genji*, and Takasue no Musume became entranced by Yūgao and Ukifune particularly. These appear odd choices because Yūgao gets carried away by Genji to a forsaken house and dies abruptly, apparently from spirit possession. Ukifune is abducted by Genji's son, has sexual relations with the son and his rival, and tries to drown herself in the Uji River. Has Takasue no Musume shaped her whole story to be comparable to Ukifune, a warning "of the extent to which ego-centered individuals bring about their own torment"?⁹ Instead, her daydreams seem innocent: to be "hidden away in a mountain village like Lady Ukifune, happy to be visited even only once a year by a high-ranking man, handsome of face and form, like the Shining Genji in the tale."¹⁰ In middle



The Sumiyoshi Shrine from a June 2013 Japan Studies Association (JSA) site visit. Photo by reviewer.

age, Takasue no Musume rounded up staff and companions and went off to Uji because she had always been "curious about the kind of place" where Ukifune lived; she found the surroundings "lovely."¹¹ She also visits the real Sumiyoshi Shrine where Genji went to give thanks for a child. These pilgrimages to literary sites at times required sleeping in the open and worrying about bandits from the hills. Her initiative and drive seem secular, not religious.

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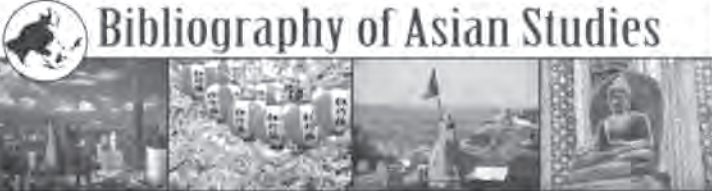
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Often, she tells us how happy she has been. Her older sister dies, but Takasue no Musume adopts her sister's children; she writes that she will miss sleeping with a child on either side of her. She exchanges poetry with women who share deep emotion and with her father, who writes of his longing to fulfill her wishes. She attracts no prince, but in her mid-thirties becomes a second wife to a man of relative prestige and wealth, who says "do what you think best" when she wants to travel.¹² The marriage lasts seventeen years and she has three children, including a "sprout" she mentions fondly. Her enjoyment of all these facets of life belies common stereotypes still held by our students that Asian women are either confined and dominated or unchained tigers.

Arntzen and Itō have provided a useful and provocative book. I would recommend the reader to begin in the middle with the diary itself and then, when the editors' notes reveal contradictions, patterns, and complexity, to turn back to the introductory essays. Students or teachers then may also speculate as to whether the intrigues and images of fiction may be more central to this woman's life than prayer, remorse, or loneliness. Jane Eyre and Ukifune led tumultuous lives, but how nice in old age to be able to experience that tumult from the security of a lamp-lit room. ■

NOTES

1. Sonja Arntzen and Itō Moriyuki, trans. and eds., *The Sarashina Diary: A Woman's Life in Eleventh-Century Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
2. *Ibid.*, 90.
3. Ivan Morris, trans. *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams: Recollections of a Woman in Eleventh-Century Japan* (New York: Dial Press, 1971).
4. Richard Bowring, trans. and ed., *Murasaki Shikibu: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs* (Princeton: Library of Asian Translations, 1982), 31. Bowring calls the Japanese scholar Teika "cavalier" in first calling Takasue no Musume's work a "nikki."
5. Arntzen and Itō, 19.
6. Arntzen and Itō, 14–19, discuss Teika but do not suggest that anyone other than Takasue no Musume shaped the work.
7. *Ibid.*, 206.
8. *Ibid.*, 208. Arntzen and Itō point out there has been debate over the authorship of the last poem (81–88).
9. Andrew Pekarik, ed., *Ukifune: Love In The Tale of Genji* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 140.
10. Arntzen and Itō, 142.
11. *Ibid.*, 184.
12. *Ibid.*, 182.

FAY BEAUCHAMP is Professor of English and Director, Center for International Understanding, at Community College of Philadelphia. She admits to a bias in favor of literary pilgrimages, having recently mustered colleagues to visit the Sumiyoshi Shrine in 2013 and Uji in 2014. Unlike Takasue no Musume, Fay creates workshops with support from organizations such as the Japan Studies Association, the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership, and the US Department of Education National Resource Centers.