

3-2-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Lazarus, Ashton, "Retelling the Story of a Song: Devotion and Accomplishment in *Shakkyōka* and *Imayō*" (2013). *Waka Workshop 2013*.

<http://elischolar.library.yale.edu/waka2013/8>

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Retelling the Story of a Song: Devotion and Accomplishment in *Shakkyōka* and *Imayō*Ashton Lazarus  
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This paper traces a particular descriptive phrase as it moves between sutra, *waka*, *imayō*, and medieval narrative texts. Found in its oldest incarnation in the *Thousand Arm Sutra* (*Senjūkyō*), the phrase delineates two related miracles of rebirth associated with the bodhisattva Kannon: withered branches coming back to life and the sick being healed. The phrase was later formed into a song. It can be found as an *imayō* (popular song) in *Ryōjin hishō*, *Kokon chomonjū*, and *Heike monogatari*;<sup>1</sup> and as a *shakkyōka* in two collections of *waka*, *Senzai wakashū* and *Tsukimōde wakashū*. Although the words of the song are sometimes identical, each of these texts furnishes a unique narrative context. By exploring how the song is recast by authors and compilers working in a variety of narrative spaces, I suggest that the song's meaning is modulated by its context. On one level, it speaks simply of the ability of Kannon to effect certain beneficial changes, but the particulars of the surrounding narratives result in various emphases, including religious devotion, virtuosic performance, and salvation.

I begin with the passage from the *Thousand Arm Sutra*, one of the four texts in the Mahayana tradition devoted to Thousand-Armed Kannon.<sup>2</sup> This particular work, translated into Chinese by Bhagavaddharma (active mid-seventh century), narrates the origins of the bodhisattva, praises its powers and devotion to saving all living beings, and enumerates several *dhāraṇī* (incantations) intended to help the reciter gain salvation. The phrase I am interested in is short and simple:

此大神呪呪乾枯樹尚得生枝柯華果。何況有情有識衆生。身有病患治之不差者必無是處。<sup>3</sup>

This wondrous spell enchants the withered trees, returning life to the branches, flowers, and fruits. All the more so for sentient, feeling beings. The body's illnesses are cured; there are none who are not affected.

In Japan, evocations of Thousand-Armed Kannon had become more common by the twelfth-century. For example, the phrase reappears as a song in Retired Emperor GoShirakawa's (1127-1192) lengthy but largely vanished collection of *imayō*, *Ryōjin hishō* (ca. 1170s). *Imayō* are popular songs originally associated with nomadic puppeteers and female prostitutes, but starting in the early-eleventh century they came to be performed by aristocrats and eventually by members of the royal family. Of the 545 songs that make up the extant collection, 220 are designated *hōmonka*, songs about the Buddhist teachings. Approximately half are based on the 28 chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*, but there are also songs on other sutras, the various buddhas and bodhisattvas, famous holy men, the *parinirvāṇa*, and paradise. Several *hōmonka* exhibit the

<sup>1</sup> Due to space limitations I cannot discuss every appearance of the sutra phrase in the medieval archive. But it is worth noting that many later instances of the phrase occur in performance texts—for example, in the warrior tales *Soga monogatari* and *Heike monogatari*, and in the noh plays *Miidera* and *Tamura*.

<sup>2</sup> One of Kannon's six forms, Thousand-Armed Kannon was supposed to have one thousand arms and eyes, but images often depict 42 arms with inlaid eyes.

<sup>3</sup> Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, vol. 20, no. 1060 (Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1928), 111c.

formal properties of a *wasan*, or Buddhist hymn written in the vernacular: quatrains in which each line is structured around an 8-5 syllabic pattern. Song no. 39 in *Ryōjin hishō*, which repurposes the sutra phrase, is no exception. It reads:

万のほとけの願がんよりも  
 千手の誓ひぞ頼もしき  
 枯れたる草木もたちまちに  
 花さき実なると説いたまふ<sup>4</sup>

The vow of thousand-armed Kannon is more trustworthy  
 than the vows of the myriad buddhas  
 It is said that even the withered grass and trees  
 will suddenly yield blossoms and fruit

While the second couplet resembles the sutra passage, the first comments on the capacity of Kannon's pledge—it is even more trustworthy than the vows of the myriad buddhas, a sentiment which perhaps indicates the growing importance of this particular bodhisattva in lay religious life at the time. The song ends differently, too, with the quotative phrase *to toitamafu*, meaning “it is explained” or “it is preached.” Several *hōmonka* exhibit this kind of rhetoric, which evokes the oral acts of preaching, propagating, and lecturing.

The song appears again in *Ryōjin hishō kudenshū* (ca. 1169), GoShirakawa's treatise on the history, practice, and lineage of *imayō*. Although the song is the exact same, it has a different context: not one of a succession of *hōmonka*, but instead imbricated in a story about GoShirakawa's second pilgrimage to Kumano. The retired emperor has just completed one-thousand abbreviated readings of the *Thousand Arm Sutra* when he goes to Shingū to make offerings. While pursuing these deep into the night, all falls silent and he suddenly notices that the shrine's mirror is shimmering. Moved to tears, he continues to recite the sutra. One of his companions on the pilgrimage, Minamoto no Sukekata, arrives at the prayer hall before dawn and GoShirakawa comments, “If only I could hear an *imayō*. Now would certainly be a good time” (今様あらばや。只今おもしろかりなんかし).<sup>5</sup> Sukekata abstains out of respect, so GoShirakawa recites one himself—the same *hōmonka* I just discussed. He performs it several times, and Sukekata and another companion, Fujiwara no Michiie—both of them accomplished *imayō* singers—join in with their own songs.

The improvisational tenor of the story implies that this is perhaps just one of the many times GoShirakawa would have been inspired to perform the song, not to mention the hundreds of other *imayō* he had committed to memory after long years of training and practice. There is also an interplay of different forms of devotional performance at work in the story. Having arrived at Kumano, he spends no small amount of time performing one thousand abbreviated readings (*tendoku*) of the *Thousand Arm Sutra*. Having summoned the attention of the bodhisattva with his repetitive chanting, he receives an auspicious signal that seems to validate his devotional acts. It is at this moment that GoShirakawa performs his *imayō*. The moment is both reverent and

<sup>4</sup> *Ryōjin hishō*, Shinchō Nihon Koten Shūsei, vol. 31 (Shinchōsha, 1979), 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ryōjin hishō*, 257.

celebratory, and this performance should be understood not as an entertaining break from the more serious work of sutra chanting but as a continuation of the devotional act through a different vocal medium. As GoShirakawa writes elsewhere in the *Kudenshū*:

法文の歌、聖教の文に離れたることなし。法華經八卷が軸々、光を放ち、  
二十八品の一々の文字、金色のほとけにまします。世俗文字の業、翻して  
讚仏乗の因、などか転法輪にならざらむ。<sup>6</sup>

*Hōmon no uta* are not separate from the text of the sacred teachings. Each of the eight scrolls of the Lotus Sutra emits light, and a golden buddha resides in every character of the twenty-eight chapters. Secular literature too can be a means to revere the buddha; how can it not turn the wheel of the dharma?

In her discussion of GoShirakawa's undertaking, Terry Kawashima refers to this claim and others like it as "discursive insurance," a way for the retired emperor to authorize one of the many paths he devoutly pursued in order to attain rebirth in the Pure Land.<sup>7</sup> And as GoShirakawa writes elsewhere in the treatise, *imayō* can bring about other auspicious effects as well: prolonged life, renewed health, and advancement in position and rank.

Our sutra phrase appears in another of GoShirakawa's grand textual projects, the seventh royal collection of *waka* known as *Senzai wakashū*, albeit in a different idiom. The poem, no. 1238, is attributed to Taira no Tokitada (1127-89). It is his only recorded poem; hardly a poet, he was rather known for his political opportunism and, as superintendent of the *kebiishi* (municipal police), his relentless treatment of criminals, at one point displaying on a gate the severed hands of thirteen prisoners. Captured at the Battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185, Tokitada eventually died in exile in Noto Province. His poem reads:

観音の誓ひを思ひてよみ侍ける 前大納言時忠

頼もしき誓ひは春にあらねども枯れにし枝も花ぞ咲きける<sup>8</sup>

Composed while thinking on Kannon's vow:

Although it is not spring, with the trustworthy vow  
even the withered branches yield blossoms

The poem uses diction similar to the *hōmonka* I previously discussed—words like *chikahi*, *tanomoshiki*, *kare*, *hana*. But the phrase *haru ni aranedomo* is unique to this rendition. It's an extraneous addition—after all, it wouldn't be very impressive if Kannon could make branches yield blossoms *only* in the spring—but perhaps Tokitada was tapping in to the time-honored practice in *waka* poetics of staging seasonal events as occurring sooner or later than they should.

<sup>6</sup> *Ryōjin hishō*, 268.

<sup>7</sup> *Writing Margins: the Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Senzai wakashū*, Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, vol. 10 (Iwanami Shoten, 1993), 376.

In this sense, once again we see how the specific textual or performative context of the sutra phrase's repurposing can alter the meaning.

Exactly when Tokitada composed the poem remains a mystery, but his designation here as Former Major Counselor implies a date between 1184—when he fled the capital with the rest of the Taira and lost his rank and office—and 1188, the year *Senzai wakashū* was finished. Perhaps he wrote it in exile, reflecting on the grim fate of his once-glorious family, entrusting himself to the bodhisattva and wishing for rebirth. Then again, the same poem with a virtually identical headnote found in the “Shakkyō” section of *Tsukimōde wakashū* designates Tokitada as a Grand Counselor, implying he composed it before losing his office.<sup>9</sup> I relate these details here only to emphasize that, read as part and parcel of their respective narrative contexts, the two poems tell different stories.

Moving forward in time, we can further trace the trope of Kannon reinvigorating the withered trees to story no. 266 in Tachibana no Narisue's *Kokon chomonjū* (1254). It concerns the courtier Fujiwara no Narimichi (1097-1162?), known for his virtuosity in all manner of artistic and athletic pursuits, including Japanese and Chinese poetry, flute playing, horse-riding, *kemari* (court football), and *imayō*.

There are a handful of stories that highlight his proficiency in this last pursuit in particular. For example, an anecdote in the historical tale *Imakagami* (ca. 1170) tells of how Narimichi would sing a particular *imayō* one hundred times a night for one hundred consecutive nights.<sup>10</sup> In *Kokon chomonjū* there is a longer account of his facility with popular songs. It recounts an episode in which Narimichi is at Urin'in, the Tendai temple known for its *bodaikō* rite in the Fifth Month. He is practicing his *kemari* footwork but it begins to rain so he takes shelter under the eaves of a building on the premises. To while away the time he begins to sing a *kamiuta*, a type of *imayō* that deals mostly with secular topics. Upon doing so he is greeted by someone from inside the building, who tells him of an invalid who, after hearing his song, has suddenly improved. Invited in to continue this “treatment,” Narimichi performs two more songs, the first of which is virtually identical to the *Ryōjin hishō* song I discussed earlier. (The second is an equally appropriate song about the healing powers of the twelve vows of Yakushi.) Due to Narimichi's vocal intervention, the malevolent spirit subsides and the invalid is healed.

The tale concludes not with an appeal to the wondrous power of *imayō* to enact the dharma but rather with praise for Narimichi's abilities:

かならず法験ならねども、通ぜる人の藝には、靈病も恐をなすにこそ。<sup>11</sup>

Although this was not necessarily a miraculous occurrence [*hōgen*], the skill of an accomplished person gives even spirit-borne illnesses much to fear.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See poem no. 1070 in *Tsukimōde wakashū no kōhon to sono kisoteki kenkyū* (Shintensha, 1987), 300.

<sup>10</sup> *Imakagami zenshaku*, vol. 2 (Fukutake Shoten, 1983), 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Kokon chomonjū*, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, vol. 84 (Iwanami Shoten, 1966), 220.

<sup>12</sup> A similar story appears in *Jikkishō* (10:17), but the invalid is Narimichi's own wet-nurse and he recites only the second *imayō*, succeeding in healing her after singing it seven times. This story concludes with the following comment: “Although this is not a story about the [powers of] *waka*, I have included it here because of its similarity

In an essay on the powers ascribed to *uta*, Ōki Momoko reads this passage as evidence that *imayō* was endowed with the ability to function similarly to miraculous occurrences.<sup>13</sup> While the text *does* imply that the *imayō* has in fact had the same effect, which might lead us to understand this as a discursive moment in which it is effectively “heightened” to the level of a miraculous occurrence, I think there is something else going on here. The songs Narimichi performs in order to drive away the malevolent spirit are of course replete with Buddhist language and ideas, but this concluding comment seems to emphasize Narimichi’s own accomplishment over and above the religious efficacy of *imayō*. The narrator does not say that the efficacy of these songs derives from their ability to “turn the wheel of the dharma” and heal the sick—this is rather what GoShirakawa claims in his treatise on *imayō*. Instead, the narrator of this anecdote highlights Narimichi’s own virtuosic ability, reframing the performativity of songs in terms of efficacy and accomplishment, as opposed to their ability to perform miracles.

In tracing the repurposing of this particular evocation of Kannon’s miraculous powers, I have been interested in understanding the way the context of each successive retelling positions it anew. Once patterned into a song, it was able to take the shape of a *shakkyōka*, an *imayō* endowed with the power of the dharma, and finally an *imayō* that simply effected certain changes in the world. As an orally transmitted song, its significations were multiple: religious, efficacious, entertaining, practical, and didactic. It’s no wonder, then, that the song was drawn into narratives that have different aims and contexts. There is no original author to speak of here, only those involved in the song’s reception, repurposing, and propagation. Belonging to nobody in particular, it moves from body to body; the record we have must only be a tiny sampling of the many occasions on which it was recited, heard, and transmitted.

Semantically, the phrase-*cum*-song is about effecting some change—in the world, in one’s body, in the circumstances of one’s rebirth in paradise—just as Kannon reinvigorated the withered trees and leaves. But as the story about Narimichi demonstrates, the relationship between song and dharma shifts depending on the context of the telling. In some textual moments the song embodies the dharma, while in others it does not. The song may be thought of as “Buddhist” so long as it is evoked as such, but there is nothing permanent about such an identification. Repurposed from one narrative context to the next, the meaning of the song is malleable even if its linguistic configuration remains constant.

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[to such stories]” (これは和歌にあらねども、ことがら同じきによりて、書き加ふるなり). *Jikkinshō*, Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū, vol. 51 (Shōgakkan, 1997), 406.

<sup>13</sup> Ōki Momoko, “‘Uta’ no chikara: imayō no toku o kataru itsuwa o megutte,” *Gobun kenkyū* 78 (1994): 16.