

21H.522 Study Questions for Discussion

Heian and Medieval Setsuwa (271-287)

Eight short stories from collections of the 12th and 13th centuries. These are written versions of popular tales from the oral tradition, and provide rare insight into non-elite attitudes and superstitions

Questions:

What do these tales reveal about popular spirituality and ethical behavior in the late Heian and Kamakura Periods?

Are the non-Buddhist, supernatural tales at all edifying? If so, how? If not, what purpose do they serve?

Confessions of Lady Nijô (288-339)

A selection from the memoir of a Buddhist nun who once served as a lady-in-waiting and concubine to a retired emperor. Written around 1330, this illuminates the world of a sensual and vulnerable upper-class woman.

Questions:

What kinds of details does Lady Nijô stress when describing the world she lives in? How would you characterize her sensibility?

What is the role of literary allusion in aristocratic society? Under what circumstances would you resort to allusion? Compare this with the circumstances as portrayed in Lady Nijô's Confessions.

How do Buddhist values specifically affect women (i.e. Lady Nijô)? How is her life a commentary on the actual practice of Buddhist/religious values in aristocratic society? Is she a good Buddhist?

An Account of My Hermitage (377-392)

An elegant essay by Kamo no Chômei written in 1212 and expressing a deep sense of the impermanence and degeneracy of his times.

Questions:

How does Chômei view other men? What do you think of his views of other men? Does this essay present universal ideas or ideas specific to Japan?

Is Chômei totally free from attachment?

Essays in Idleness (393-421)

Excerpts from a collection of random “jottings” by Yoshida Kenkô, a nobleman who became a Buddhist lay monk. Written in 1330.

Questions:

How is Yoshida different from Chômei? What is Yoshida attached to?

How does Yoshida view other men and women?

What is Yoshida’s philosophy of beauty?

The Great Peace (472-494)

An excerpt from the *Taiheiki*, a mid-14th century war chronicle. This conveys the “masculine” flavor of these romanticized historical accounts of loyalty, treachery, bravery, cowardice, ruthless ambition, and ceaseless carnage.

Question:

What is so spiritual about these tales?

Two Companion Booklets (495-509)

Two anonymous tales (otogi zôshi): one (“Little One Inch”) a fairy tale from the 15th and 17th century, the other (“Akimichi”) a 16th or early 17th century popular story about feudal revenge and a wife’s supreme loyalty.

Question:

What are the morals to these tales?

Travel Accounts by Matsuo Bashô (510-551)

Poetic journals recounting journeys taken in 1684 and 1694 by Bashô, the greatest of all haiku poets.

Question:

What sorts of aesthetic sensibilities does Bashô’s prose and poetry convey?