Book Review

Brightwell, Erin L. *Reflecting the Past: Place, Language, and Principle in Japan's Medieval* Mirror *Genre*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2020. (ISBN: 9780674247819)

This study examines the premodern Japanese texts known as "mirrors" (*kagami*; as a genre, *kagamimono*), analyzing their value to contemporaries and their relationship to two earlier genres: the official chronicle-style histories compiled by Nara- (710-84) and early Heian- (794-1185) period court scribes in *kanbun*, the local form of literary Sinitic; and the fictive narratives grouped as "history tales" (*rekishi monogatari*) by nineteenth-century critics in a retrospectively constructed national canon of Heian works written in *wabun* or classical literary Japanese. While limning the contours of the mirror genre via the primarily medieval titles listed below, Brightwell draws detailed comparisons with a like number of coeval texts from other categories. She also assesses the genre's putative ancestor, *Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror, late 11th c.), once dubbed a history tale, and surveys the distinct use of the mirror label in early modern (1603-1868) works. Throughout, the focus is on how the mirror genre changed over centuries of warfare, as authors tried to create reassuring portraits of the past. This effort is indexed to shifting engagements with the three fonts of authority noted in Brightwell's subtitle: "place" or narrative setting; "language" (*kanbun* and/or *wabun*), including discursive register; and "principle," the worldview implied by a given writer's approach. A fourth parameter, time (tied to the figure of the eyewitness narrator) appears in the argument. It perhaps goes without saying that we also revisit the famed discussion of history and fiction in *The Tale of Genji* (ca. 1008), to which I return after a fuller summary of Brightwell's work.

In total, *Reflecting the Past* presents eight *kagamimono*, only seven of which focus on history as such. Following Brightwell's dates and descriptions, these are *Ōkagami*, an unattributed account of the reigns of emperors Montoku (827-58) to Goichijjō (1008-36); *Imakagami* (The New Mirror, 1174 or 1175), a review of Goichijō to Takakura (1161-81) credited to Fujiwara no Tametsune; *Mizukagami* (The Water Mirror, late 1180s or 1190s), covering Jinmu (traditionally seventh century BCE) to Ninmyō (810-50) and tied to Nakayama Tadachika; *Kara kagami* (The China Mirror, 1250s or 1260s), Fujiwara no Shigenori's only partially extant history of Chinese emperors Fuxi (traditionally twenty-ninth or twenty-eighth centuries BCE) to (perhaps) the rulers of the Song dynasty (960-1276); *Azuma kagami* (The Mirror of the East, ca. 1290s), a work of unknown authorship spanning the Genpei war (1180-85) to Prince Munetaka's tenure as shogun; *Masukagami* (The Clear Mirror, ca. 1368-75), a review of the court from Takakura to the contested reign of Godaigo (1288-1339) after the fall of the first shogunate; and *Shinmeikyō* or *Shinmeikagami* (The Mirror of the Gods, mostly late 14th c.), an unattributed survey of emperors from Jimmu to Gohanazono (1419-70). To underscore the genre's growing salience to medieval readers—and the shifting emphasis on the four sources of authority noted earlier—Brightwell also takes up *Nomori no kagami* (The Mirror of the Watchman in the Fields, 1295), a poetic treatise linked to Minamoto no Arifusa. Each of the study's five chapters centers on one or two of these mirrors, discussed chronologically in the context of political upheavals and related events.

As the helpful lists at the head of each chapter make clear, these mirrors span not only the eras and institutions noted above but also a stylistic continuum, ranging from *wabun* script with courtly prefaces to annalistic *kanbun* without formal introduction. Some mirrors deploy varying mixtures

of script and register or unorthodox uses of language (e.g., variant or *hentai kanbun*). Similarly, some writers invoke authority by tying their frame narratives to specific settings (e.g., a prominent temple) or preternaturally old narrators. Others make only hazy nods to speaker and place. As her title previews, Brightwell stresses the mirror's traditional Asian association with "reflecting the past" to shed light on the present, a trope tied to the Buddhist karmic mirrors in which sinners literally re-view their sins before meeting posthumous judgement. Noting the century-long gap between the production of *Ōkagami* and the first of the seven lesser-known mirrors, she thus looks to the present day of each work, asking why contemporaries might wish to revisit the events discussed there and inferring answers by juxtaposing both those events and recent history with the reference points earlier, and with other historiographic works.

Brightwell's discussion of the "principle" at work in each mirror is especially interesting. Chapter 1, "New Reflections: Refuge in the Past during the Final Age" uses *Ōkagami* and *Genji ippon kyō* (One-Volume Sutra on the Genji, ca. 1176) to read *Imakagami* as an attempt to restore elite confidence after the Hōgen and Heiji Disturbances by letting readers re-experience the good times as well as the bad via a circular narrative that loops back to the same events via different characters, underscoring Buddhist teaching about the inevitable decline of the law while creating a soothing distance from recent political violence. Chapter 2 ("Deviant by Design: Multilingual Writing in Postwar Medieval Japan") enlists other texts to reveal how *Mizukagami* imbeds the Genpei wars writ large in a perversely comforting portrait of the same universal decline while sidestepping related regional history. Chapter 3 ("Containing China: The Continent as Medieval Object of Knowledge") shows *Kara kagami* deploys the shifting mandate of heaven to explain the rise of the shogunate. The final two chapters find a break with such cosmological comforts. Chapter 4 ("Moving *Mirrors*: Ordering the Past in the Wake of the Mongols") depicts *Azuma kagami* and *Nomori no kagami* as comparatively simple retreats into lost glory and courtly views of "propriety." Chapter 5 ("Memories of *Mirrors*: Nostalgia for a Unified Realm") presents *Masukagami* and *Shinmeikyō* as broad celebrations of shogunal power as such, regardless of clan or institutional site. On this account, neither later mirror invokes a larger historical movement.

Given the study's wealth of fascinating detail and its explicit focus on historiography, my main unanswered question about the mirror genre may seem myopic. Like many historicallyoriented discussions of the so-called "debate about fiction" (*monogatari ron*) in *The Tale of Genji*'s twenty-fifth chapter, *Reflecting the Past* presents Genji's attempted seduction of Tamakazura as mainly concerned with different approaches to the past. It is clear from Brightwell's recap of the episode that she recognizes how Genji's desire shapes his remarks, leading him to valorize both tales and official histories at different points, the better to endear himself to Tamakazura. Meanwhile, Tamakazura's comments reflect her goal of parrying Genji's advances, thrust by thrust. In this sense, the fictional episode is just as concerned with the shifting particulars of the narrative present as it is with the abstract sweep of the past. Erin Brightwell's important book persuasively makes the same point for the medieval mirror genre. Still, considering the immense gap between even the two imaginary aristocrats in the *Genji* episode—one a powerful middle-aged nobleman, the other his vulnerable young foster-daughter— I remain curious about similar tensions within each mirror and its audience. I hope that other researchers will consider excavating those stories, inspired by this compelling new book.

Reviewed by

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