

At Midlife in Medieval Japan

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“A Long Tale for an Autumn Night” tells the story of an ill-fated love affair between Keikai, a highly placed priest of Mt. Hiei, and Lord Ume-waka, son of the Hanazono Minister of the Left. It ends with the burning of Mii-dera, where the young lord had been residing as a chigo, the suicide of the young lord, the awakening of Keikai to the truth of impermanence, and the revelation of the young lord as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Kannon. It has been interpreted as didactic, teaching the doctrine of impermanence, and also as part of a cynical attempt to obscure the realities of institutionalized homosexual prostitution and rape. An alternate interpretation from the perspective of analytic psychology sees it as a tale of midlife transition. This interpretation raises the issue of applying a psychological theory developed in the context of twentieth-century Euro-America to medieval Japan. Hermeneutic pluralism maintains that several different interpretations may all be informative and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Alternate interpretive theories can be evaluated in terms of interpretive power and interpretive scope, while specific interpretations must be evaluated in terms of interpretive match. On all of these criteria, the interpretation of “A Long Tale” as one of midlife transition appears to be supported.

Keywords: *chigo monogatari* — midlife transition — analytic psychology — Tale — Autumn Night — hermeneutic theory

IF IT IS TO AVOID THE pitfalls of an uncritical and decontextualized comparativism, use of analytic psychology in the academic study of religion necessarily entails questioning the propriety of applying analytic psychology cross-culturally. Are these concepts culturally delimited? Are they only applicable to Zürich in the first half of the twentieth century? To Western Europe? To the larger European cultural sphere, e.g., the U.S. and Canada? Or does analytic psychology provide a set of theories for interpreting a wide variety of religious phenomena?¹

¹ One may wonder to what extent perhaps Jung's own interest in the dreams and symbol

Independent confirmation is one of the most important standards for evaluating scientific theories. Yet, independent confirmation is rarely expected in a field so suspect of being subject to the vagaries of an individual researcher's beliefs as is the psychological interpretation of religious phenomena. Is the example being molded by the researcher's own preconceptions so that it appears to conform with the conceptual scheme of analytic psychology? In the case of the medieval Japanese story "A Long Tale for an Autumn Night," however, the match between the plot and symbols of the story, and the pattern of developments occurring in midlife, as described by Murray STEIN (1983) and Joseph HENDERSON (1967, pp. 196–221) is so striking—despite the distance in time and culture—that it is hard to see it as only an artifact of interpretation.

"A Long Tale for an Autumn Night" (*Aki no yo no nagamonogatari* 秋夜長物語) has been translated by Margaret H. CHILDS, who maintains that it is part of a "didactic literature" that develops "the concept of transience as experienced by Buddhist priests in the same way as medieval war tales reveal its meaning for warriors.... [T]he priests who wrote them were creating a literature relevant to their own experience, stories that depict a religious response to the tragedies of life" (1980, p. 131). The tale itself dates from at least 1377 and, though there is no attribution of authorship, scholars of medieval Japanese literature assume that the author must have been a Buddhist priest (CHILDS 1980, p. 127, n. 5).

Historical and Religious Context

There are five aspects in the story that are important for understanding this "Long Tale" from medieval Japan: the historical conflict between Mii-dera 三井寺 and Mt. Hiei 比叡山; the importance placed on having an independent ordination platform; the role of armed monks; the role of doctrinal concepts (e.g., impermanence and originary awakening) in medieval Buddhism; and the position of *chigo* 稚兒, young boys or novices, in medieval Japanese monasteries.

The story revolves around a conflict between two temples: Mii-dera and Mt. Hiei (these are the commonly used names; the temples' proper names are Onjō-ji 園城寺 and Enryaku-ji 延暦寺, respectively). Mt. Hiei had been founded by the famous priest² Saichō 最澄 (767–822) in the

systems of other cultures—Native American, African, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese—was itself motivated by this question.

² The terms "monk" and "priest" are used interchangeably here and are not intended to carry the same distinctions the terms would have in discussing religious specialists in the Christian tradition.

Heian era (794–1185; the era many consider to be Japan’s “high classical” period) as the training and ritual center for Tendai Buddhism in Japan, while Mii-dera was established by one of his most famous successors, Ennin 円仁 (794–864). According to George SANSOM, the conflict was fundamentally “an unseemly jealous rivalry, perhaps intensified by a conflict over the degree of emphasis to be placed upon the mystic side of Buddhism, which it was Ennin’s purpose to introduce into the Tendai teaching and practice” (1958, pp. 221–22).³

Later, as both institutions gained independent power, political conflicts came into play. At one point the abbacy of Mt. Hiei became vacant, a position requiring governmental approval. Both temples put forward candidates to fill the vacancy. The government first appointed the Mii-dera candidate, but under extreme pressure from Mt. Hiei, switched its appointment to the other candidate. At this point Mii-dera broke with Mt. Hiei, which leads to one of the problems at play in our story. The right to ordain priests was conferred by the government, and it had only been with great efforts that Mt. Hiei had itself gained the privilege of ordaining priests, breaking the long-standing monopoly on ordination held by Tōdai-ji 東大寺 in Nara. While previously Mii-dera monks had been ordained on Mt. Hiei, the schism between the two institutions now made this impossible. When Mii-dera applied to the government for the right to establish its own ordination platform, Mt. Hiei again exerted extreme pressure to block the granting of this right.

The means for applying this pressure was provided by groups of armed monks. With the initial tensions between these two temples, they each began to employ guards (*akusō* 悪僧, literally “bad monks”). With the growth of holdings of landed estates (*shōen* 荘園), monasteries needed larger bodies of warriors to protect their properties and collect their taxes. Groups of armed monks (*sōhei* 僧兵) were established, effectively constituting standing armies—in many cases several thousand strong. Thus when Mt. Hiei wished to object to the appointment of the Mii-dera candidate to the abbacy, three thousand armed monks were dispatched to the residence of the regent, where they maintained an unbroken, noisy riot (SANSOM 1958, p. 271). Government forces were unable to control the monks and in this way Mt. Hiei forced the change.

Tensions between the two temples finally led to open warfare in May 1081. Mii-dera monks mistreated an imperial messenger on his

³ The issue of how much tantric practice (Sansom’s “mystic side of Buddhism”) was to be integrated into Tendai would have been a major concern, on a par perhaps with whether there is Biblical authority for the sale of indulgences.

way to a shrine under the protection of Mt. Hiei. Thousands of monks from Mt. Hiei then descended on Mii-dera, burning all of the buildings and over twenty-thousand rolls of Buddhist texts. What was saved from the destruction was taken as spoils by the Mt. Hiei monks (SANSOM 1958, p. 271).⁴

Although the tale's description of the burning of Mii-dera is based upon historical events, it may also be seen as an expression of one of the most consistent themes of medieval Japanese literature: impermanence (Jpn. *mujō* 無常; Skt. *anitya*). According to William R. LAFLEUR, "By the end of the Heian period... a particular emphasis on the *mujō* of dwellings and habitations becomes manifest in the literature. This suggests that, from this point on, *mujō* was conceived of not only as *impermanence*—that is, as a temporal category—but also as *instability*, a spatial one" (1983, p. 61). Later, in a discussion of Kamo no Chōmei's 鴨長明 (1155–1216) *Hōjō-ki* 方丈記 ("Account of My Hut"), LaFleur points out that in medieval Japanese literature "The habitation becomes not merely another instance among many where *mujō* is demonstrated but a context of particular importance, a precise mediator between the large context, the world as a whole, and the small one, the individual. All are shot through and through with *mujō*; it pervades all" (LAFLEUR 1983, p. 63; see also LAFLEUR 1992, pp. 40–42).

Introduced to Japan as a basic tenet of Buddhism, impermanence became an important aesthetic category in medieval Japan. Sensitivity to the impermanence of things and the inevitable death of people leads to an aestheticized sadness, an awareness referred to as *mono no aware* 物の哀れ. For the poets of the Heian "spring blossoms and the autumn moon arouse only melancholy reflections upon *mono no aware*" (SANSOM 1958, p. 226). Diarists of the period, whether sincere or not, likewise express a world-weariness: "They must, they tell us, give up the vain search for pleasure and retire to a monastery or to some mountain retreat where they can lead a holy life and attend to their own salvation" (SANSOM 1958, p. 226).

Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of this aestheticization of impermanence is the transformation of a classic Indian Buddhist practice of meditating on decaying corpses.⁵ In its Indian forms this

⁴ The destruction of Mii-dera by monks from Mt. Hiei was repeated several times in the course of the medieval period. For example, another conflict in 1319 again led to the destruction of Mii-dera by the monks of Mt. Hiei (SANSOM 1958, p. 133). There were other similar conflicts as well, including a conflict over appointment to the abbacy of Kiyomizudera 清水寺 that led to the destruction of Kiyomizudera by monks from Mt. Hiei in 1113 (SANSOM 1958, p. 272). Many additional instances could be cited.

⁵ There are two prominent versions of this meditation, one in nine stages found in the *Satipatthana-sutta*, and one in ten stages found in the *Visuddhimagga* (SANFORD 1988, p. 57).

practice was intended to free the meditator from any attachment to the body, an important aspect of the quest for liberation. In the medieval Japanese illustrated cycle of poems the *Kuzō-shi* 九想詩,⁶ the decaying corpse is not only aestheticized but also eroticized, and is more than just a means for achieving liberation from attachment.⁷ According to James SANFORD, the poems

show a considerable interest in the employment of the erotic possibilities of the topic, though this is in part a subtle effect carried more by the concretely organic images of the decay motif than by explicit sexual imagery. Still, “perfumed body,” “naked bodies,” the classical “clouds and rain” allusion, and even the painful image of flies like “a shining carpet on the flesh” are phrases that betray a less than philosophic turn of mind. (1988, p. 59)

While impermanence plays a central role in Buddhist teachings as a rationale for practice, it moved out of an exclusively religious role and came to be a consistent theme in poetry, novels, and diaries of the period. For medieval Japanese, then, the Buddhist concept of impermanence not only was important as a religious concept, but also permeated the culture.

One of the main characters in “A Long Tale for an Autumn Night” is Lord Umewaka 梅若, a boy living at Mii-dera as a *chigo*. Margaret H. Childs introduces her translation of “A Long Tale” with a brief definition of *chigo*:

In medieval Japan, the term *chigo* referred to boys between the ages of about seven and fourteen who resided in temples as though at a boarding school. A second meaning of *chigo* was youths involved in homosexual relationships with priests. It seems that the Buddhist priests who taught these boys in secluded mountain temples were relatively safe from the temptations of women, but were susceptible to the charms of the *chigo* who lived in their midst. (CHILDS 1980, p. 127)

Medieval Japan did not share the “modern antipathy toward homo-

See Liz WILSON (1996) for a feminist reading of these practices in which the focus of attention is decaying *female* corpses. Also, John STRONG (1992, pp. 76–85) has written on a related motif in the legend of Upagupta.

⁶ Falsely attributed to the Chinese T’ang dynasty poet Su Tung-po (1036–1101) (SANFORD 1988, p. 59).

⁷ This link between the erotic and the ascetic is in fact also found in the Indian Buddhist context, where it provides one form of what Liz WILSON calls a “therapeutic of salvation” (1996, p. 115).

sexuality” (CHILDS 1980, p. 131).⁸ Although in the literature the relations between monks and *chigo* often end tragically, the stories are to demonstrate impermanence, and are not intended to show that homosexuality and pedophilia inevitably lead to tragedy. “The stories exploit the style of Heian-period love tales, but, with some action and drama, they develop the concept of transience [impermanence] as experienced by Buddhist priests in the same way as medieval war tales reveal its meaning for warriors... the priests who wrote them were creating a literature relevant to their own experience, stories that depict a religious response to the tragedies of life” (CHILDS 1980, p. 131).

Bernard FAURE has researched additional background on the religious practices surrounding *chigo*, particularly in some Tendai lineages (1998). Relevant to our understanding of “A Long Tale” is the practice of *chigo kanjō* 稚児灌頂, a form of ordination or empowerment (Skt. *abhiṣeka*) in which the *chigo* is ritually identified with the bodhisattva Kannon. Through ritual identification the *chigo* becomes a living embodiment, or *avatar*, of Kannon. Thus, it is not surprising that the *chigo* at the center of action in “A Long Tale” is revealed at the end to have been Kannon, who had become embodied for the benefit of the monk, and monastic and lay communities.

The practice of *chigo kanjō* is in turn linked to the doctrine of originary awakening (*hongaku* 本覺), one interpretation of which was the identity of defilements and awakening (*bonnō soku bodai* 煩惱即菩提). FAURE explains:

Following the *hongaku* notion that “defilements are awakening,” sexual transgression with a *chigo* involves no culpability, provided that the *chigo* has duly received the *abhiṣeka*, that is, that he is Kannon... having sex with an avatar of Kannon transmutes desire into deliverance, whereas having sex with an uninitiated *chigo*, a profane body, will cause one to fall into the three evil destinies. Avatars of Kannon were relatively rare in China and pre-Kamakura Japan, however, whereas in medieval Tendai they were created ritually. The self-serving aspect of this reasoning is all too obvious. False consciousness or not, the fact remains that the identity between the *chigo* and Kannon or other bodhisattvas and kamis had become part of the medieval Japanese imaginary. (1998, p. 261)

Faure’s research goes beyond the *chigo monogatari* 稚児物語, which casts the relations between monk and *chigo* in a “general atmosphere [that] is, to use categories that may be inappropriate, tragic and romantic”

⁸ For an aestheticized version of homosexual relations in the Edo era, see SCHALOW 1990.

(FAURE 1998, p. 245). Examining the record for the actualities, Faure's analysis reveals the *chigo monogatari* to be "a rather crude ideological cover-up for a kind of institutionalized prostitution or rape" (FAURE 1998, p. 265). However, while "A Long Tale" can be interrogated as part of a duplicitous pretense of sanctity, it can also be approached as a psychological document revealing the way in which medieval Japanese monastics approached midlife. The issue of a plurality of interpretive strategies will be discussed in the conclusion.

As "A Long Tale for an Autumn Night" may not be readily familiar to many readers, a rather detailed summary of the story is given in the following section.

Précis of "A Long Tale for an Autumn Night"

The story opens in a conversational mode, an unnamed narrator speaking to a group of priests late in the evening. "Recently I have heard something very strange, enough, indeed, to make you raise your heads from your pillows. I shall tell you a long tale for an autumn night to keep you company in the sleeplessness of old age" (CHILDS 1980, p. 132). This tale of long ago concerns Master Keikai 景戒, a priest of the Eastern Pagoda on Mt. Hiei. Keikai is introduced as fully accomplished—"proficient in both religious practices and scholarship" (CHILDS 1980, p. 132), a teacher (*risshi* 律師) of the rules of the order (Jpn. *ritsu* 律; Skt. *vinaya*), learned in the Tendai tradition, familiar with the four methods of attaining enlightenment⁹ and the three insights.¹⁰ Also knowledgeable regarding Confucianism and military science, "he was a true master of both the literary and military arts" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133). He was relied upon by everyone, "clergy and laity alike" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133).

He is "in the prime of life"; however, one day he awakens "from a restless night of dreams of falling blossoms and scattering leaves" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133). He is dissatisfied with his own conduct. Despite having entered the path of the buddhas, "night and day I am preoccupied only with fame and profit" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133). He desires to leave his temple and build himself a retreat, "a hut of brushwood," deep in the mountains. However, his karmic relations, both with his fellow priests and with the deities of the temple, make it difficult for

⁹ The four methods are "sudden, gradual, esoteric, and variable" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133, n. 28).

¹⁰ The three insights are "that all things are immaterial or void, that all things are unreal or transient, and a middle ground, consideration of both concepts" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133, n. 28).

him to depart, and considerable time passes aimlessly, despite his fervent desire to become a recluse.

Perhaps “the reason that such a fervent wish had not been answered was that some evil spirit was obstructing him” (CHILDS 1980, p. 133). He travels to a temple in Ishiyama 石山 to enlist the aid of the bodhisattva Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva symbolizing the perfection of compassion). “For seventeen days he would prostrate himself and with single-minded sincerity pray that his heart be made firm so that he might soon attain supreme enlightenment” (CHILDS 1980, p. 133).

The evening of the seventh night of his vigil finds him falling asleep with his head on the dais, and having a dream in which he sees a “beautiful youth of indescribably noble appearance” (CHILDS 1980, p. 134). The youth is wearing “a robe embroidered with a pattern of green leaves” (CHILDS 1980, p. 134) and is gathering up the petals falling from a blooming cherry tree. Keikai believes that this portent is the answer to his prayers.

Returning to Mt. Hiei, “Keikai waited for faith to arise at any moment *as though he expected something from outside himself*” (CHILDS 1980, p. 134; emphasis added). However, rather than deepening his resolve to leave the world, the youth who appeared in Keikai’s dream becomes an obsession—a source of feelings of frustration and futility, since the desired is only a dream image. Keikai considers the possibility that it is Hie Sannō 日吉山王, the deity of Mt. Hiei, who is himself obstructing Keikai, because Hie Sannō wants to keep him at Mt. Hiei as one of his priests. Keikai decides to return to the temple of Kannon at Ishiyama.

On his way a sudden spring shower leads Keikai to take shelter at Mii-dera, a temple that has had a long series of conflicts with Mt. Hiei. Seeing the “beautifully colored branches of an ancient tree” over a garden wall, he approaches the gate to the garden. Looking in he sees the youth of his dream—“the master saw the very face, the same expression that, ever since his dream, had so captivated him that he had not known where he was” (CHILDS 1980, p. 135). Completely distracted, Keikai spends the night on the verandah of the main hall.

In the morning he returns to the garden gate, where he meets the youth’s attendant, a young boy named Keiju. The attendant identifies the youth as Lord Umewaka, son of the Hanazono 花蔭 Minister of the Left. Although wishing to send the young lord a letter expressing his feelings, Keikai feels that this would be too forward and immediately returns to Mt. Hiei without completing his journey to Ishiyama.

Keikai then begins to find excuses to visit an old acquaintance who lives close by Mii-dera. After some time he meets with Keiju and

expresses his feelings. Convinced of Keikai's sincerity, Keiju agrees to help, suggesting that Keikai write a letter that he will deliver to Lord Umewaka.

The letter delivered, the young lord replies, expressing his distrust of Keikai's sincerity. Keikai receives this reply and is only further moved by his desire. Wishing to stay close by, he concludes that this "would have been too obvious," and he sets off for Mt. Hiei. Delaying at every step, he only reaches a village on the shore of Lake Biwa, at the foot of Mt. Hiei, where he takes shelter for the night. The next morning, wandering absent-mindedly back toward Mii-dera, he meets Keiju. Keiju is carrying a letter from the young lord, expressing a different attitude, now trusting in Keikai. Keiju arranges for Keikai to stay with an acquaintance of Keiju, a priest who lives close by the young lord's residence. At night Keikai goes to the residence and the young lord hopes to slip away so as to meet him secretly. But for ten days they cannot meet, and Keikai determines that he must return to his own temple. That very night, however, there comes an opportunity for them to finally meet.

Very late that night Keiju brings the young lord to Keikai's room. Keikai is overwhelmed by the young lord's beauty. "They wept as they opened their hearts to each other. Sincere were the vows they exchanged as they lay together" (CHILDS 1980, p. 139). Parting in the early morning, they exchange poems.

Dejectedly, Keikai returns to Mt. Hiei. Afraid to be seen in such a state, he declares that he is ill and refuses to see anyone, spending his days in despondency. Learning of the master's seclusion, the young lord grows concerned. Expecting a letter that never comes, he commands Keiju to take him to the master, no matter how far away or the consequences.

Despite not knowing where he is going, Keiju agrees to take the young lord to Keikai. Setting off, they make their way toward Mt. Hiei. Being unaccustomed to traveling by foot, however, the young lord becomes exhausted. Being pulled along by Keiju, the young lord wishes "that someone, even a goblin or ghost, would pick them up and take them to Mt. Hiei" (CHILDS 1980, p. 141).

As night falls, they take shelter under some pine trees. An aged *yamabushi* 山伏 (mountain ascetic) riding in a palanquin comes along and inquires concerning their destination. Declaring that he is going nearby the temple they seek, he offers to let them ride in his palanquin. Once inside, however, the young lord and Keiju find themselves flying through the air to a different mountain where they are "thrown into a cave which was shut up with a huge boulder. There was no

telling night from day; not a ray of moon or sun could they see. Water trickled from the moss, wind raged in the pines, and their cheeks were not dry for a moment. They discovered that many priests and lay people, men and women, had been captured and in the gloom they could hear no other sound than weeping” (CHILDS 1980, p. 141).

The disappearance of the young lord causes great distress among the priests of Mii-dera. Learning that a priest of Mt. Hiei, their ancient antagonist, “had recently pledged his love to the youth,” (CHILDS 1980, p. 142) the priests of Mii-dera conclude that the young lord’s father must have been complicitous. Five hundred of them attack the minister’s residence and succeed in destroying everything, burning every building to the ground.

Sensing an opportunity to defeat Mt. Hiei, which had six times kept them from establishing an independent ordination platform, two thousand priests of Mii-dera set about fortifying their positions and setting up an ordination platform. Aware of this challenge, Mt. Hiei notifies over 3,700 branch temples and shrines. Amassing a force of over a hundred thousand, they launch an attack on Mii-dera. In the vanguard is Master Keikai. After three hours of fighting, the attackers are exhausted and the temple has still not been taken. Alone, Keikai drives forward, leaping into the ditch surrounding the defenses, then climbing the slope to storm over the fence. Alone among the three hundred defenders of this part of the temple, Keikai kills freely, scattering the defenders before him. His five hundred followers move in behind him, setting fire to the buildings of Mii-dera. All are “reduced to ashes in moments” (CHILDS 1980, p. 144). Only the shrine of Shinra Daimyōjin 新羅大明神, patron deity of Mii-dera, was left standing.

Meanwhile, locked in the goblin’s cave, the young lord overhears the goblins gossiping about the destruction of Mii-dera. The goblins rejoice, glorying in the knowledge that it was their abduction of the young lord that has led to this most recent conflict between Mt. Hiei and Mii-dera. “The young lord was stunned, fearing lest he be to blame for the ravage of Mii-dera. With no one to tell him exactly how it happened, he and Keiju could only grieve and sob all the more” (CHILDS 1980, p. 145).

Just at that time the goblins bring an old man into the cavern. “His captor explained, ‘I nabbed him when he missed a step and fell off the edge of a rain cloud. Give him some name and use him as a servant. He is inferior to no one at flying through the sky’” (CHILDS 1980, p. 145). After a couple of days the old man asks the young lord and Keiju why they are constantly crying. Upon learning of their situation, the old man expresses his wish to help them by taking them to the

capital. Collecting tears from the young lord's sleeves, he rolls them in his left hand. They form a large sphere that the old man breaks in half. Shaking the two halves, they become a flood inside the cavern. Suddenly, the old man changes into a storm god. Trembling in fear, the goblins flee and a dragon god kicks open the cavern prison. Placed upon a cloud, the young lord, Keiju, and all the other prisoners are transported to the capital.

Going to his father's mansion, the young lord and Keiju find it completely destroyed. Having nowhere else to turn, the two boys go back to Mii-dera, only to find it also destroyed. Desolate, the young lord feels that all of this destruction is his own fault, and his alone. After taking shelter for the night in the shrine of Shinra Daimyōjin, they go on to Ishiyama, hoping to find the chief priest of Mii-dera. Learning that he is not there, Keiju offers to go to Mt. Hiei to find Master Keikai. Feeling that the fault is all his own, the young lord decides to commit suicide. He writes a poem alluding to his intention, and without revealing the contents, has Keiju take it as a letter to Keikai.

Upon reading the letter, Keikai understands the meaning of the cryptic poem, and in a panic he and Keiju rush back toward Ishiyama. On their way, however, they meet a group of travelers who describe having seen a youth leap from the bridge over the Seta River 瀬田川 and disappear under the waters.

Hastening to the bridge, Keikai and Keiju find evidence that the youth who committed suicide was indeed the young lord. Although wishing to join him in death, Keikai and Keiju are restrained by a group of priests who arrive just then. After extensive searching, the young lord's body is finally found. No efforts at reviving him are successful. The following day the body is taken to a nearby crematory and "reduced to a wisp of smoke" (CHILDS 1980, p. 148).

After three days of mourning, Keikai sets out on a pilgrimage, carrying the young lord's ashes in a box strapped around his neck. Later he builds a hermitage on Mt. Nishi (or Sei-zan) 西山, where he prays continuously for the young lord's liberation. For his part, Keiju becomes a priest and retires into seclusion on Mt. Kōya 高野山.

Meanwhile, the thirty priests of Mii-dera who had originally attempted to establish their own ordination platform return to the temple. Determining that there is no way they can continue to live there, they decide to keep vigil in the shrine of Shinra Daimyōjin, offering a last formal service. "When it had grown so late that dream was indistinguishable from reality," a large company of high-ranking priests, courtiers, and their attendants arrive from "out of the vacant eastern

sky” (CHILDS 1980, p. 149). Upon inquiring of one of the retainers, the priests learn that Hie Sannō, the patron deity of Mt. Hiei, has come to visit Shinra Daimyōjin, the patron deity of Mii-dera. Shinra Daimyōjin emerges from his shrine and greets his guests. The feast and entertainment last all night.

In the morning, when they are leaving, Shinra Daimyōjin accompanies his guests beyond the temple gates, signifying his respect. As he returns to his shrine, one of the priests approaches him and inquires why he had entertained “Hie Sannō, the patron god of our enemy, Mt. Hiei. What is your divine motive?” (CHILDS 1980, p. 149).

Shinra Daimyōjin explains that the destruction of the temple opens up a field of merit for those who engage in its reconstruction. He is more concerned with facilitating awakening than with physical buildings. Both he and Hie Sannō are delighted with Keikai’s awakening, which “was accomplished by the Ishiyama Kannon manifesting herself as a youth” (CHILDS 1980, p. 150). So saying, Shinra Daimyōjin withdraws into his shrine. When the thirty priests awaken, they all describe the same dream. The priests are inspired to practice austerities, and decide to visit Keikai in his hermitage. Keikai has now taken a new name, Sensai 瞻西.

For his part, Sensai’s life as a recluse living in extremely austere circumstances draws many other visitors as well. Having experienced the truth of impermanence, he determines to establish a temple closer to the capital where he can provide others with religious teachings. “From near and far, treading close on each others’ heels, the high and low flocked here to press their palms together in worship” (CHILDS 1980, p. 151).

Analysis: A Tale of Midlife Transition

Both Murray Stein and Joseph Henderson have employed the tripartite analysis of rites of passage originating with Arnold van Gennep to describe the psychic transformations occurring at midlife: a separation from one’s social group, a liminal period in which social identity is transformed, and a reincorporation into the social group with the new identity.¹¹ Stein also utilizes the developments of van Gennep’s

¹¹ Interestingly, Hans DIECKMANN (1968) also employs a tripartite structure, but without making any explicit reference to van Gennep. The three phases are referred to in the subtitle of his work: crisis (Ger. *krise*), reversal (Ger. *umkehr*), and new beginning (Ger. *neubeginn*). The meaning of these three for Dieckmann may be glossed by reference to the titles of his three major chapters: the path inward (Ger. *der weg nach innen*), resignation (Ger. *die resignation*), and emergence (Ger. *der erfolg*).

ideas made by Victor Turner. Both Henderson and Stein feel a need to place greater emphasis on the psychological aspect of the transition they are describing, in contrast to the social aspects emphasized by van Gennep and Turner. This is evidenced by the modifications they make to the terminology employed. Stein speaks of separation, liminality, and reintegration—the last referring to a psychological reintegration following the disintegration of the sense of personal identity, the persona, experienced during the phases of separation and liminality (STEIN and STEIN 1987, p. 293). Van Gennep's term for the final stage is reincorporation, referring to the individual's reincorporation into a social group. HENDERSON speaks of submission, containment, and liberation (1967, p. 200). These refer to the individual's relation to a significant social group. For Henderson, however, there is a final stage of transition, or initiation into a final stage of life, which cannot properly be characterized by the symbolism of liberation. "The final stage of initiation, then, might best be called the state of *immanence* in the sense that individuation forces a man to obey the immanent law of his own nature in order to know himself as an individual" (HENDERSON 1967, p. 201). In the following we will examine the story from each of these two descriptions of the midlife transition.

Stein: Characteristics of the Three Phases of the Midlife Transition

Stein describes separation as a period of loss and death. One loses one's sense of purpose, one's involvement with the life one has lived: "The ability to prize your favorite objects—your 'works': children, possessions, power positions, accomplishments—has been stolen, and you are left wondering what happened last night? Where did it go?" (STEIN 1983, p. 4). The something that has died is the persona, the socially defined sense of identity. One is somehow no longer identified with the persona and it becomes a "corpse" that must be found and buried: "to identify the source of pain and then to put the past to rest by grieving, mourning, and burying it" (STEIN 1983, pp. 27–28). Our story opens with Keikai confronting just such a loss of certainty: "[One day] in the prime of life, he awakened from a restless night of dreams of falling blossoms and scattering leaves" (CHILDS 1980, p. 133). In Japanese literature falling blossoms and scattering leaves are classic symbols of impermanence. Keikai has become aware of impermanence, and is dissatisfied with what he has accomplished with his life to date. At the same time he is unable to follow up on his desire to make a change. He drifts along aimlessly, going through the round of temple life, which he now finds meaningless. Feeling himself blocked,

he wonders if there is some evil spirit who is obstructing him. However, it would seem that he cannot overcome the karmic bonds with the deities and priests of his temple through his own conscious, ego-based attitude. Therefore, he must seek intervention from some greater power, in this case the Ishiyama Kannon.¹² In Stein's terminology he has gone in search of the corpse so that it can be buried. Thus, Keikai has separated from his earlier psychosocial identity, his persona, and moved into liminality.

According to Stein the liminal phase is marked by three characteristic experiences—(1) confrontation with the shadow, (2) confrontation with the “soul-mate,” and (3) confrontation with death precipitating a steep descent into deep liminality, the descent into hell. The breakdown of the persona, the psychosocial identity, experienced in the separation phase releases “two hitherto repressed and otherwise unconscious elements of the personality: the rejected and inferior person one has always fought becoming (the *shadow*), and behind that the contrasexual ‘other,’ whose power one has always, for good reason, denied and evaded (the *animus* for a woman, the *anima* for a man)” (STEIN 1983, p. 26).

It would seem important when considering “A Long Tale” to see the entirety of the story as a dream—that is, every aspect refers to the midlife transition—instead of focusing solely on those events that occur only to Keikai. In his treatment of the Circe episode of the *Odyssey*, STEIN employs the same hermeneutic strategy:

If we regard the Circe episode as we would the *dream* of a man passing through midlife liminality, we may avoid the hazard of getting stuck at the level of a host of superficial parallels to conscious experience.... [Further,] this type of interpretation helps to steer clear of grossly moralistic observations and reflections, which inevitably end up obscuring the more subtle psychological meanings of events.

(1983, p. 89; emphasis in original)

From the perspective of seeing the entire tale as a dream, Mii-dera itself, with its long-standing antagonism against Mt. Hiei, may be seen as the realm of the shadow for Keikai. The attack upon the villa belonging to the father of the young lord represents an outbreak of

¹² As a figure representing an enlightened figure, it could be asserted that Ishiyama Kannon represents the *self* as this term is understood in analytic psychology, i.e., as the entirety of the psyche. This is not to be confused with the use of the term *self* in English as a gloss for *atman*, which carries metaphysical significance in Indian thought and the existence of which is, of course, denied in Buddhist thought (Skt. *anātman*).

the shadow. Stein sees uncontrollable impulses, e.g., kleptomania, alcoholism, promiscuity, as evidence of the shadow's activity. The monks who attack the villa are definitely out of control. They are acting on the paranoid suspicion that for some indiscernible reason, the young lord's father is conspiring to bring shame upon them. This paranoid suspicion would certainly seem to refer to an uncontrollable impulse, although in this case acted out collectively by a group of Mii-dera monks. The shadow, however, is only one of the two important repressed elements of the psyche. In many passages Stein identifies the other as the "soul-mate."

In Stein's interpretation of the *Odyssey*, the "soul-mate" is Circe, a "contrasexual 'other'." However, "A Long Tale" raises an important theoretical issue regarding the notion of "contrasexual 'other'" that Stein finds to be "more specific to the midlife transition" than to other life transitions (STEIN 1983, p. 107). Stein, as so many other theorists, seems to take heterosexual relationships as normative. The "soul-mate" is, therefore, structured according to the dominant pattern of the contrasexual opposite, the anima or animus. One would expect the dynamics of this aspect of the midlife transition to be open to greater variety in societies that are much more accepting of homosexual relationships, such as medieval Japan. Although the dynamics may be made more complex in such a social situation, the theory of midlife transition proposed by analytic psychology asserts that there is still a psychic need for the establishment of a new relation with the contrasexual other; for Keikai this would be the feminine anima. This complexity is played out in the relation between Kannon, understood in East Asia as female, and her incarnation as the young lord, the male object of homosexual desire.

The final liminal element described by Stein is the descent into hell that is associated with a confrontation with death. "At the crux of midlife liminality is the experience that is imaged, dreamt, and felt as existing in a land of the dead: the end of the line, a city of ghosts, rooms without exit, senseless chronicity and repetition, despair" (STEIN 1983, p. 108). Maintaining the hermeneutic strategy of seeing the entire story as relating to a midlife transition, there appear to be two corollaries of Odysseus's descent into hell: the kidnapping and imprisonment of the young lord and Keiju by the goblins and Keikai's period of austerities following the young lord's suicide.

The characteristics of subterranean darkness and despair are typical of the rapid descent into deep liminality described by Stein:

the young lord and Keiju were thrown into a cave which was shut up with a huge boulder. There was no telling night from

day; not a ray of moon or sun could they see. Water trickled from the moss, wind raged in the pines, and their cheeks were not dry for a moment. They discovered that many priests and laypeople, men and women, had been captured, and in the gloom they could hear no other sound than that of weeping.

(CHILDS 1980, p. 141)

In this cavern prison the young lord and Keiju are confronted with the threat of death and are in a state of deep liminality.

For Keikai the confrontation with death is the suicide of the young lord. Weeping over the body and performing the cremation appear as the pivotal events in leading Keikai to a full realization of impermanence. He then retreats into isolation on Mt. Nishi. Though lacking the explicit hellish qualities of the cavern prison, this retreat is another variant of extreme liminality—despite the tendency of Japanese culture to idealize and aestheticize the eremitic life. It is in this period that Keikai is transformed and completes his particular transition through the restructuring of his psychic orientation.

Following the *Odyssey*, Stein suggests that in deep liminality there is the opportunity to meet a “wise old man” (STEIN 1983, p. 92) from whom one gains guidance for the balance of one’s life, a new sense of mission and purpose (STEIN 1983, pp 122–26). Initially one might assume that the storm god who frees the prisoners from the cavern prison might be this wise old man, but he appears to be in some ways more of a trickster figure—first appearing as a helpless old man, then manifesting a power that overwhelms the goblins. Although not directly linked with the deep liminality of the imprisonment, the role of the wise old man is played much more clearly by Shinra Daimyōjin himself when he reveals the hidden purpose of the tragic events. “I am delighted by Keikai’s religious awakening and the good influence he has had on others. Although products of sorrow, these things are causes for joy” (CHILDS 1980, p. 150).

The final stage for Stein is reintegration, i.e., the creation of a new psychic organization. Keikai has finally learned the truth of impermanence and is able to fulfill the longing for solitary life that had initiated his separation from his persona. It is now, in this period of seclusion, practicing austerities, that Keikai succeeds in creating a new psychic organization. His actions up to this point have largely been ego-based, as, for example, the reemergence of the heroic attitude in the battle of Mii-dera. After the cremation his psyche is organized around the truth of impermanence. This new psychic organization is self-consciously marked by a new name—Keikai, Preceptor of the Eastern Pagoda of Mt. Hiei, has now become Sensai, eremY_ EÔhEðluse of

Mt. Nishi. A new purpose has taken hold of his life; initially performing ceaseless prayers for the benefit of the young lord, he eventually devotes himself to teaching others.

Henderson: Interpersonal Dimension of the Midlife Transition

Joseph Henderson has highlighted the importance of the social matrix for the movement toward individuation at midlife. "For individuation to become an actuality, three conditions are necessary... (1) separation from the original family or clan; (2) commitment to a meaningful group over a long period of time; and (3) liberation from too close an identity with the group" (HENDERSON 1967, p. 197).

Keikai's life evidences fulfillment of these three conditions. First, as a Buddhist priest, he has been removed from his natal family and received a new identity as a member of the Buddha's family. His high status on Mt. Hiei—Preceptor of the Rules of the Order—demonstrates his commitment over an extended period to his religious community. As the story relates, however, this commitment itself becomes part of what impedes him—his karmic relations, both with his fellow priests and with the deities of the temple, make it difficult for him to depart, and considerable time passes aimlessly, despite his fervent desire to become a recluse (CHILDS 1980, p. 133).

Finally, his romantic involvement with the young lord, who is under the protection of a temple long antagonistic to his own, fulfills the third condition. Keikai spends time with various priests in order to be close to the young lord. These are priests affiliated with Mii-dera, Mt. Hiei's despised other.

His identification with Mt. Hiei is still very strong, however, as evidenced by his leading role in the attack on Mii-dera. Henderson postulates "a cyclic character to each threshold crossing," which is evidenced by the fact that "people in the second half of life are frequently gripped by the youthful power of the hero myth, with which they are enabled to meet the next developmental challenge of their lives" (HENDERSON 1967, p. 196). Certainly Keikai's actions at the battle of Mii-dera are heroic—single-handedly breaching the defenses, opening the way to victory.

In an ironic twist it is this victory that leads to the suicide of Keikai's lover. Further, however, it is this very suicide that brings about Keikai's final separation from his identification with Mt. Hiei. Following the cremation, Keikai first undertakes a pilgrimage, which may be identified with what HENDERSON describes as "a journey of release, renunciation, and atonement, presided over and fostered by some spirit of

compassion" (1964, p. 152). Keikai then establishes a hermitage on Mt. Nishi. Here he is fully separated from his former identification with Mt. Hiei. As was common for medieval Japanese monks, he changes his name at this time, thus clearly marking his changed identity.

Henderson has pointed out that for individuation, the final stage is not simply liberation from some social group, but rather a consciousness of the immanent reality of one's individual existence. Not only is Keikai liberated from his former identification with his monastic role as a part of the community of Mt. Hiei, he has come to be an isolated individual. As an eremitic recluse, he is entirely alone:

In a thatched hut, eighteen feet square, half concealed by clouds, he wore a robe as thin as withered lotus leaves even after the frosts of late autumn and ate only fruit blown down by the morning breezes. The wind rustled through the pines, and streams babbled down the mountain slopes.

(CHILDS 1980, p. 150)

Despite his desire to live apart from the world, his fame for austerities grows, and he has an increasing number of visitors. As a result he determines to establish a temple closer to the capital from which he could be of greater service to others.

Although this aspect is not discussed by either Stein or Henderson, it has been proposed that one of the marks of a successful midlife transition is the development of an attitude of generativity, the desire to provide for others, especially for the next generation.¹³ In Sensai's desire to establish a temple we see him moving beyond his individual existence as an isolated hermit and revealing his individual purpose, a leadership role. Such a position of leadership, founder of a new temple, is distinct from his youthful climb to authority and power. Where the earlier was persona-motivated, this new role is motivated by a desire for service, for generativity.

Individual Problematics of Keikai's Story

Having established that the story follows the basic structure and con-

¹³ Allan B. CHINEN describes generativity as "a nurturing attitude directed first toward one's children, and then toward the whole next generation—toward one's students, protégés, and junior colleagues" (1992, p. 30). Chinen cites Erik Erikson as having identified the importance of generativity for midlife development, though the concept (if not the specific term) is also found in the work of Hans DIECKMANN, who says of midlife that the task of midlife is to lead to a "different attitude toward the positions of leadership and the responsibilities already attained, an attitude that should reach beyond the events of the day, mindful of coming generations rather than solely concerned with fulfilling one's own drives, be they money, power, respect and recognition, or the like" (1991, p. 107).

tents of the midlife transition as described by Stein and Henderson, we can examine the unique characteristics of this story as a record of an individual's midlife transition. The drama of the story hinges entirely on "the lure of the soul-mate" often felt strongly at midlife. Stein describes the dangers involved: "During midlife liminality, the seductiveness of the anima can be especially dangerous, her song fatefully attractive, and her promises unspeakably alluring; and it is important to resist falling naively into the hands of the Power" (STEIN 1983, p. 101). Cornelia Brunner points to the characteristics of establishing a proper relation with the anima, stating that more than a relation with a person, it is "mainly the establishment of a relationship with the inner, feminine side of his psyche, and thus to the feminine principle. The deep fascination produced by the Anima-projection resides in its religious origin. The religious images at its base are suited to compensate for the one-sidedness of the masculine world-view" (BRUNNER 1986, p. 130). Lacking a proper relationship to the feminine, Keikai falls victim to the lure of the "soul-mate," Kannon embodied as the young lord.

As a monastic, Keikai would have had very little opportunity to establish a psychic relation with the feminine through an actual relationship with some particular woman,¹⁴ and it is noteworthy that there are no women mentioned as such in the entire story. Because Kannon is generally considered to be feminine in East Asia, Keikai's appeal to her for assistance may be seen as an attempt to establish such a relation with the feminine as compassionate. However, unlike Odysseus, who receives assistance from Hermes when he establishes a relation with Circe, Kannon seems to purposely involve Keikai in a situation that calls forth his heroic attitude. Keikai's leadership in the battle of Mii-dera is an outward expression of the heroic attitude and is not inappropriate at midlife, where, as Henderson indicates, the reemergence of a youthful heroism is useful when employed for the more inward struggles of personal development.¹⁵

There is, then, more than simple irony in the fact that Keikai's success as the hero of the battle directly contributes to the suicide of the young lord. It is just that suicide that leads him to the realization of impermanence and retreat into solitude. Thus Kannon has indeed granted Keikai's original request for assistance.

¹⁴ The case of Ikkyū, who did establish such a psychic relation with the feminine through an actual relationship with a woman, is noteworthy. See SANFORD 1981, COVELL 1980, and FAURE 1998.

¹⁵ HENDERSON asserts that the initiatory imagery of midlife is distinctly different from that of earlier, heroic phases of life (1967, p. 198).

Conclusion

Clearly, a story such as “A Long Tale” may be interpreted from a number of different perspectives.¹⁶ It may be considered as a piece of literature, as indicated by both Childs’s and Faure’s discussions of the character of *chigo monogatari* as a genre and the place of “A Long Tale” in that genre (CHILDS 1980 and 1985; FAURE 1998, pp. 241–47). It may be seen as an instance of the religious culture of medieval Japan, employing such formal doctrines and popular conceptions as impermanence, originary awakening, identity of defilements and awakening, the incarnation of bodhisattvas, and the intercessionary character of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and kami. It may be approached sociohistorically, as Faure does when he questions the role of *chigo monogatari* as part of a “crude ideological cover-up” of institutionalized rape and prostitution. And, it may be understood psychologically, as an instance of a psychological genre of midlife tales (CHINEN 1992, pp. 1–7).

To date most of the research on midlife transition has been on tales and case materials from Western European societies. It raises the question then of whether the theory of a midlife transition can be applied to other times and cultures. Despite the difference in time and culture, Stein’s and Henderson’s descriptions of the midlife transition are startlingly accurate for understanding this medieval Japanese story. Both the tripartite sequence (separation, liminality, and reintegration, or submission, containment, and liberation) and the symbolic contents (loss of certainty, confrontation with the shadow, confrontation with the “soul-mate,” confrontation with death precipitating a steep decline into deep liminality, and reintegration of a new personal sense of life’s purpose) have significant similarities to the narrative of “A Long Tale.”

Each of the interpretive approaches mentioned above, together with others that may be developed, contribute to a larger understanding of the story. From the perspective of what I think of as “hermeneutic pluralism,” it is not a question of which interpretative approach is

¹⁶ While my discussion here is in terms of interpretation, I do not accept the epistemic distinction between understanding and explanation, which in its current form derives most importantly from Vico and Dilthey. Although this dichotomy informs much of the methodology of the social sciences, amongst which I include religious studies, I think that if one can explain, then one understands, and that if one understands, then one can explain. By this I do not mean, however, a retreat to “the sterility of purely formal argument and debate” arising from a positivist approach to the social sciences (RABINOW and SULLIVAN 1987, p. 5), but rather more adequate formulation of both understanding and explanation. As Edward O. WILSON suggests (1998, p. 209), the distinction between understanding and explanation looks suspiciously like a matter of professional territoriality. Perhaps fortunately for the reader, a footnote is hardly the place to attempt a complete epistemology.

the correct one. It is, rather, a more pragmatic concern with what may be called interpretive power and interpretive scope. Interpretive power refers to the question of how much additional understanding the approach gains for us, or what it allows us to see that we would not have seen otherwise.¹⁷ Interpretive scope refers to the question of how wide a range of material can be meaningfully compared and found to have significant similarities.

The analytic psychological theory of midlife transition does well on both of these criteria. Viewing “A Long Tale” as a midlife tale reveals aspects that may otherwise be overlooked, e.g., the significance of the irrational attack on the young lord’s father’s house, and the inappropriate character of Keikai’s movement back to an outward heroic attitude in the battle at Mii-dera. At the same time, this tale itself demonstrates the scope of the theory of midlife transition, linking “A Long Tale” to a wide range of other stories, e.g., the *Odyssey* and—taking *story* in a broad sense—case material discussed by both Stein and Henderson.

The interpretive power and scope demonstrated by this part of analytic psychology suggests that the academic study of religion may find other aspects of analytic psychology to be of equal power and scope in interpreting religious phenomena. The criteria of interpretive power and scope apply to the interpretive approach as such. Any particular interpretation, particularly one such as that given here, which suggests a significant expansion of the scope for the application of analytical psychology, needs to be evaluated against a different kind of criteria, which may be called “interpretive match.” Interpretive match is the question of how well the interpretive theory matches the phenomenon being interpreted, as evidenced for example by the order of events in the story matching the tripartite sequence of the theory. In applying a theory like that of midlife transition to a particular story, there will of course always be points at which the particular and the general do not match—as discussed above under the rubric of “individual problematics.” If such mismatches are significant, then either the interpretation is inappropriate or the theory is in need of revision. If the interpretation is forced, e.g., the theory is only selectively applied or the phenomenon is radically recast so as to better fit the theory, then the interpretation lacks validity. I have attempted to avoid such a Procrustean interpretation here, though my success will of course be subject to the judgments of others.

¹⁷ Clearly the idea of interpretive power is not whether the interpretation produced is unassailable, which may simply indicate that the interpretive approach is tautological.

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