No male writer has written primarily or even largely for women, or with the sense of women’s criticism as a consideration when he chooses his materials, his themes, his language. But to a lesser or greater extent, every woman writer has written for men, even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women.

— Adrienne Rich

In her story “Godaidō” (The Temple Godai), published posthumously in 1896, Tazawa Inabuné depicted the way literary criticism directed and inhibited women’s written expression: “These women writers are certainly pitiful creatures. Whenever they allow themselves to describe even a little of their own thoughts, they are immediately derided as hussies. Fearing just this sort of reaction, they avoid writing what they really want to, both hoping to be praised as feminine and lacking the courage to go against public opinion.”

Inabuné knew of what she spoke. A year earlier she had been the target of a harsh critical review when one of her stories featured a young woman who refused an arranged marriage. After deriding the author for portraying a flapper (hasula musume) instead of a properly modest woman, one critic charged that it “was not clear where the portrait of [the heroine] ended and the author’s began.”

Inabuné died before she could respond to this criticism. But critical readings that sought to establish a particular model for women’s expressions continued to flourish. Nearly a century later, in her 1983 essay on women and language, writer and critic Tomioka Taeko noted the way expectations of the male critic—or, more accurately perhaps, those who write in “men’s language”—have continued to exert influence on the female literary voice:

Men who use “men’s language” are responsible for establishing the reputations of female writers. Unconsciously, women express themselves in a manner “for men.” Writing “for men” takes the form of fitting into the cate-
gory of “things women write” rather than writing with “men’s language.” Whether conscious or unconscious, there is a use of “women’s language” which caters to the reviews written in “men’s language.” A “female-school” poet or a “feminine-style” fiction writer does not invite male hostility since they do not challenge “men’s language.”

These observations of the impact criticism has had in defining and confining literary expression affirm the assessment American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich leveled against the North American male-dominated literary establishment of the 1970s, cited above in the epigraph. Rich’s comment in turn echoes the struggles to which Virginia Woolf alluded much earlier in her battle to overcome the pressures of the “Angel in the House,” whose whispered admonitions in the ear of the author as she sat, pen in hand, threatened to silence the author’s creative impulses: “Be sympathetic, be tender; flatter; deceive, use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anyone guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure!”

In order appropriately to appreciate the textual depths, subterfuges, strategies, omissions, and choices—or lack thereof—confronting the modern woman writer in Japan, readers must consider the kind of criticisms and expectations that she has faced. We must listen to the admonitions that have been whispered in her ear and pay attention to the way she has herself responded to them. What did it mean to be a woman writer in twentieth-century Japan? How was she defined and how did this definition confine her artistic sphere? Western-language scholarship on Japan has addressed these questions over the last thirty years—with careful analysis of women’s writing, grounded in Japanese literary history and laced with Western literary criticism. This volume builds on existing scholarship by offering English-language readers access to a number of the critical sources that Western scholars have used in their studies. The essays translated herein represent some of the more salient critiques that have been directed at women writers, on the one hand, and the way women writers have reacted to them, on the other. Whereas not meant to be a complete or exhaustive coverage of all aspects or genres identified with women’s literary endeavors in the twentieth century, the essays in this volume provide, in their aggregate, an understanding of the evaluative systems under which women writers have worked.

Over the course of the twentieth century, but particularly in the earlier half, many critics used the term joryū sakka to describe the “woman writer.” With no clear evaluative nuances, the phrase was intuitive and applicable to any writer who happened to be female. Not all critics have been as comfortable with such inattention to the consequences of the labeling. “Why is there a specific literary category entitled ‘women’s writing,’ when there is no such defined category for
male writers?” Hasegawa Izumi asked in 1976. The answer that he then provided is illuminating: “Inherent in the word ‘writer’ is the implication that the sex of the writer is male, while the word ‘literature’ similarly implies that which is written by men.” Hasegawa’s statement makes it clear that literature was by definition a male enterprise, occupation, and privilege. Women were barred from it, not necessarily out of any malicious attempt at exclusivity but because they were—at least in the minds of those who had the power to make such claims—biologically, emotionally, and/or socially incapable of achieving the objectivity necessary to write superior works that pursued the expression of higher truths.

By the early 1980s, with the development of a conscious feminist approach to literary analysis in Japan, these assumptions of inherent difference and the limits they imposed were subjected to rigorous scrutiny. In conjunction with an increasing interest in challenging the traditional parameters of a women’s literature and of a literary criticism that was, as Takahara Eiri noted in 1999, “saturated with the thinking of the adult male,” critics began to treat male-authored texts to new, feminist readings. In their playful yet pointed critique of canonical male writers, Danryū bungakuron (On men’s literature, 1992), Ueno Chizuko, Ogura Chikako, and Tomioka Taeko not only hold men to the same gender-based criticism women have received over the centuries, but they also open these male-authored texts to new interpretive strategies. In many respects their discussion of “men’s literature” brings this volume full circle. An anthology that begins with men critiquing “women’s literature” ends with women critiquing men writers as men. This is not to suggest that essentialization is any less objectionable when directed against those traditionally in positions of power. But the intentional self-consciousness of the critique lays bare the implications of the practice.

This volume is divided into six chapters organized under headings that encapsulate the general character of the subsequent essays. The chapters follow one another more or less chronologically, with some gaps as well as overlaps in both the time covered and the concepts explored. The organization of the essays should not imply an ideological progression. Rather, what readers will find is the way the same arguments continue to insert themselves into the critical discourse of the day. The terminology and the rigidity of the arguments may transform with time. But at the core the attitudes enshrined remain the same. Regardless of shifts in historical circumstances and in critical voices, as long as the woman writer remains a “woman writer,” the insistence on her inherent “womanliness,” her imitative nature, her physicality, and her vanity remains constant. Concomitant with this constancy is the essentialization of “woman” as an unproblematic category. Female critics and writers are equally accountable to charges of essentialization, with claims that only a woman writer can create
a “real” female character, for example. But the defensiveness of their position is perhaps understandable when we consider another constant in these essays, and that is the perceived right of men to determine when, where, and how a woman should write.

The women writers represented in this volume, therefore, are constantly being reminded that they are women writers and are put in the position of needing to write either in accord with or opposition to prevailing (male) attitudes about what that means. The organization of the essays into thematic divisions clarifies how the discussion of women writers has been framed by certain assumptions and how women have repeatedly tried to intervene by playing with, undercutting, or attempting to exceed these assumptions. Each section is preceded by an introduction written by American, Australian, and Japanese scholars of modern Japanese women’s literature. The introductions contextualize the translated essays historically and draw out for remark aspects of the essays that warrant particular scrutiny or explication.

The Feminine Critique

Chapter 1 of this volume, “The Feminine Critique,” includes four essays that range from 1898 to 1938 and introduce readers to the more prominent criticisms confronting would-be women writers in the early twentieth century. Not prepared to discourage women from writing altogether, critics were mindful of trying to find the form and approach that would most appropriately reveal a woman’s strengths. Kunikida Doppo, writing in 1898, urges women to devote themselves to translation. Not requiring excessive amounts of uninterrupted time, imagination, or diverse experiences—which women do not have—translation, in Doppo’s estimation, offers women a satisfying outlet for their creative energies. Others find the poetic form—emblematic of the suggestively insubstantial beauty of past tradition—most suitable to women. What is notable in early discussions of women’s writing is the recurring insistence that it serve as a feminine complement to the more masculine undertaking of “serious” writing. A woman must not strive to write “like a man,” the literary establishment, or bunraku, asserted. Rather, she should mine that within her that best presents her innate “womanliness,” or onnarashira.10

The characterization of “womanliness” was keyed to and exacerbated by social mores and restrictions. Believed to be the intellectually weaker of the sexes, the late-nineteenth-century woman was denied equal access to education. Predictably, she therefore had a more difficult time availing herself of contemporary intellectual discourses and by necessity resorted to a language of metaphor and emotion, which consequently only confirmed assumptions that she was in-
capable of anything but such language. Restricted by traditional codes of behavior from interacting with others beyond her own social ken, she was not permitted a broader exposure to contemporary social and political concerns and as a consequence focused her attention on that with which she did have contact. Thus she was assumed incapable of writing of anything else. Social reality influenced literary production, which led to critical assumptions. Assumptions coalesced into orthodoxy, which in turn restricted literary production.

Because critics shared a collective understanding of the primacy of this “womanliness,” there was no need to subject it to scrutiny or attempt to define it. Women were to be womanly because they were women. And to be womanly meant to be first and foremost gentle. Gentleness gave rise to other subsidiary qualities such as modesty, altruism, and devotion to home and family and made the woman particularly susceptible to emotion and sensitive to beauty. As poet and essayist Yosano Akiko pointedly observed in 1921, women who did not recognize their inherent natures as women were deemed unwomanly and subject to repudiation. “No matter which or how many superb qualities a woman might have, if she lacks one thing—womanliness—her value as a human being is taken as zero.”

1. A 1908 roundtable discussion among Oguri Fuyō and four other male writers in the journal Shinchō (New currents), also included in chapter 1, underscores the devastating effect of this “zero” status. If a woman writer lacks “womanliness,” these critics state, they will not read her works. For a writer to be left unread (but not apparently uncriticized) is ultimately to be “nothing,” a silence, a blank, zero.

Since the onset of the Meiji period, male reformers had encouraged women’s literary activities. Hoping to inspire a revival of a female strain in writing, they urged the woman writer to demonstrate what was presumed to be the elegant gentility of tenth- and eleventh-century writers such as Murasaki Shikibu.12 The women who answered the call, such as Kitada Usurai and the above-mentioned Tazawa Inabune, were known at the time as keishū sakka, or lady writers. They were generally of a privileged background and had been afforded an above-average education. But try as they might to write in a womanly way, they were inevitably to discover that the mere act of writing, of publishing, of pushing themselves forward, invited censure. Those who endeavored to pen “womanly” pieces were marginalized for being overly sentimental and unworthy of serious scrutiny. As the feisty critics in the 1908 Shinchō article observed, such writers offered little more than “housewife art” (okusama gei): “Women write fiction half for their own amusement—much as a retiree dabbles in tea or bonsai. A man struggles over each manuscript page. A woman writes to amuse herself.”

But when a woman poured heart and soul into her work, when she wrote of what mattered most deeply to her, she was derided for being overly proud and
forceful. Kitada Usurai, for example, had won critical admiration for her chaste and reserved character when she penned pieces with a gentle elegiac tone. “For those who have sought the Murasaki Shikibu of the Meiji period—who but she can be the one?” they had asked.  

But once she imbued her works with a more pronounced protest over the social inequities she saw about her—particularly as concerned women—the same critics who had lauded her cried foul. “If you have the leisure to criticize us with that fancy writing brush of yours, then your time would be better served sewing dust cloths.”  

A modern Murasaki, Meiji women writers discovered, was an impossible ideal. “Emulate the Murasaki Shikibu of old,” they were encouraged, “and not the Shikibu of the back alleys.” The ensuing humiliation this derision provoked was enough to force the timid writer back into the private recesses of her home, where she was to remain, as the term keishū connoted, “a talented lady of the inner chamber.”  

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new kind of woman writer. Having benefited from the universal educational system and the leveling of class distinctions, she was not as averse to taking risks and facing scrutiny. Disinterested in conforming to traditional marriage arrangements, many women writers at the time flouted social expectation and used the ensuing notoriety as the subject matter of their subsequent fiction. Marked by sex but not by class, women writers from the 1920s on were largely referred to as joryū sakka. The change of terminology, however, did not diminish the insistence that women follow the same writing program that had been outlined for their predecessors. Indeed, if anything, by the second decade of the century “woman writer” as a concept had become codified by the male-dominated literary establishment. Joan Ericson points out in her incisive study, “The Origins of the Concept of ‘Women’s Literature,’” that the confluence in the 1920s of increased female literacy, mass-circulation journals for women, a leveling of social classes, and the beginning of national imperialism gave rise to the notion that joryū bungaku, or women’s literature, was less a category and more a style:

A market niche that mirrored the sex-segregated world of higher education and gender-specific conventions of composition—employing, principally, a written-as-spoken, rather than a self-consciously intellectual voice—came to be styled “women’s literature.” Such broad characterizations of style cut across gender lines of both writers and readers. But the conventions were codified, even as anomalies were allowed. Those women, or those works by women, that failed to meet these expectations were treated as “masculine” exceptions.  

The codification of “women’s writing” as style in the 1920s did little to clarify its contours. Women from all walks of life, with all manner of educational back-
grounds and political or social interests, were believed to share quintessential and irrefutable feminine qualities that were manifest in their subsequent literary productions. With the exception of those “masculine” few—typically acknowledged as Miyamoto Yuriko, Hirabayashi Taiko, and a handful of others—who were able to somehow transcend or overcome their female “weaknesses,” these qualities seeped seemingly unconsciously into a woman’s writing, as Kawabata Yasunari observed in his 1934 critique:

I rather enjoy reading works written by women writers. Even when the work is artistically weak, or perhaps especially when it is, I can sense how difficult it is to be a woman. I may say this because I am a man, but women’s works are somehow direct. They are raw. Although many people say that women writers are reluctant to tell the truth, and that they hide it with embellishments, regardless of how experienced the writer is, or how inexperienced, women writers inevitably reveal their true selves. Even though she may not notice it herself, she is bared naked by her work. No matter how exquisitely she tries to costume herself with her writing, she is as unclad as the emperor revealed in the fairy tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” I cannot help but think that the hearts of women are this way by nature. To put it bluntly, women’s works are stimulating to the senses. They have an honest body.19

Kawabata’s reference to a true self, the inevitability of self-exposure, and masquerade are topics that will be taken up below, as they resurface in the essays collected in chapters 2 and 3 of this volume, “The Essential Woman Writer” and “The Narcissistic Woman Writer.” Here it is worth noting the essential sensitivity and inherent naturalness that are applied to women and their writing, for these are qualities that would become both the strength and the scourge of women’s expression during the war years.

The Essential Woman Writer

If the 1920s saw the crystallization of “women’s writing” as a concept, the subsequent war years ensured its indoctrination. War activates gender distinctions that in moments of peace are open to contestation. Agitation for equal rights is set aside out of respect for greater national (read patriarchal) interests. Feminist agendas become luxuries. Men and women pull together in the spirit of unification and strength, and the essentialization of male-female gender roles is not only intensified, but it is also justified. Writers—whether male or female—could no longer write only for their own selfish interests—be they personal amusement or basic survival. Writing now had to serve the good of

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the nation. Women on the “home front” were galvanized to rein in their excessive passions, overcome their scandalous proclivities, and put their inherent compassion to work in penning stories that, in the words of naval commander Tashiro Kei, would soothe the hearts of wives and families and “encourage the brave martial spirits of soldiers at the front.” Even women who went overseas to report from the battlefronts were expected to pack along with them their innate sensitivities and unadorned emotions, which they could then marshal to write evocative and moving pieces about the courageous Japanese soldier and the industrious colonists.

The postwar period brought with it numerous political advancements for women—most important the right to vote. Women found increased access to education and greater opportunities in the workplace. Women writers who had made their name before the war returned to the writing arena with greater creative vigor as more and more new women, the products of political and educational changes, began to write. The appearance of these new writers was seemingly so sudden and so vibrant that many male writers felt threatened. But as Setouchi Harumi notes in her 1962 essay—an observation Tomioka Taeko will echo in her 1986 piece—in reality the scene was not awash with women. “The number of women writers was few and far between when compared to men, accounting for less than 1 percent. Because writing men far outnumber women, the activity of two or three women writers always seems strikingly conspicuous.”

This “conspicuousness” of the writing woman invited a renewed consideration of the terms under which she was evaluated. Special journal issues were organized around the topic of “the woman writer.” Roundtables were convened and questionnaires dispatched—all in an effort to analyze the relevance of current literary practices. Numerous critics, as Joan Ericson shows, advocated an immediate cessation of separation by gender. There was a sense that women writers had been “coddled” by these gendered considerations. They were entitled to separate awards and were frequently allowed space in journals simply because they were women. For too long they had been allowed to depend on their sexuality and the public curiosity it provoked and were thus competing unfairly with men. It was time for women to “overcome” their sex and become genuine writers in the real sense.

The three essays in chapter 2 reveal that though critics were now aware of the implications of gendered critiques, attitudes toward women’s writing remained largely unchanged. If anything, the notion of the “woman writer” that had evolved over the last few decades had grown so deeply rooted in critical consciousness that it was viewed less as a social construct and more an irrefutable fact. On the one hand, women were being asked to “transcend” their (female)
natures and join the ranks of real (male) writers. On the other, critics such as Okuno Takeo and Akiyama Shun were encouraging women to celebrate their uniquely female attributes. These assumed attributes—sensitivity, raw honesty, bodily presence—were ushered forth as antidotes to the depersonalization of postwar modernity. Women were still the complement to men. But now they became not just essentialized by a modern literary tradition that favored men, but also essential to it. Through women's writing, as Akiyama Shun notes, men can return to their own lost childhoods—to imaginary womb-like realms where they are protected against, in Shibusawa Tatsuhiko’s words “the severity of the intellect.” Okuno Takeo takes the proposition even further by suggesting that not only do women invite male readers into other worlds, but also the world of their writing is inherently the source of Japanese literature itself:

Naturalism and the “I” novel are said to be based on lofty concepts that include revelations of reality, pursuit of truth, literary dedication, the literary expression of honest accounts of real life, yearning for sincerity, resistance to authority, restlessness, and transgression. However, these literary forms derive primarily from highly feminine attributes such as passivity, whinging, envy, laments of personal unhappiness, residual affection for jilting lovers, voyeurism, and gossipy chatter. Being rugged students from the provinces, the Naturalist writers deluded themselves that they were free of feminine influence.

Assigning the novel to the realm of the female is of course a backhanded compliment. Because the Japanese novel could not resist negative feminine impulses, it was unable to evolve along the lines of modern masculinist principles into a format of intellectual merit. Or in Jan Bardsley’s words, “Assuming that women were congenitally incapable of connecting the novel and politics themselves . . . Okuno imagines women domesticating the novel, making it women's work in much the same way as they attend to cooking, housework, and child rearing. The ease with which this transition occurred causes Okuno to wonder if the novel, as it had developed in Japan, had not always been a feminine form; domestic in the double sense of uniquely Japanese and essentially the province of women.”

The Narcissistic Woman Writer

One of the themes around which discussions of women writers was often organized was that of narcissism. A glance back at the 1908 roundtable discussion between Oguri Fuyō and his peers reminds us of the acute discomfort the writing woman provoked in her male readers. Her audacity in presuming her
works would measure up alongside a man’s invited comparison to performers, mimics, and monkeys. “How would it be if they did not put on airs? If they behaved like the women they are—revealing their true thoughts, observations, and worries (should they have any) honestly?”

But what were a woman’s “true thoughts” supposed to be if not those that men assumed they should be? Women had learned that they could not write about themselves or about collective female experiences without resorting to codified notions of the feminine. Otherwise, their portraits would be jarring. Like the female impersonator, women writers had to learn to represent themselves as they had been portrayed by men for centuries. Their efforts compelled Yosano Akiko to remark in 1909 that the female characters women writers produced were “lies” (owo no onna) meant to seduce a male reader. But even when the woman writer listened to the murmured entreaties of the “Angel in the House” and suppressed the passions and brilliance that stirred within her in an effort to satisfy critical expectation, she ran the risk of inviting censure by the very process of writing, of inserting herself into the public eye. For as Setouchi Harumi suggests, “the very act of writing—of presenting one’s work to the world—is in and of itself an act of male aggression.”

Moreover, as Setouchi Harumi continues, a woman who writes is ultimately a woman who, it would seem, has exposed her “innermost shame to scrutiny.” With that in mind, one has to have what it takes to strip in broad daylight. The very act of self-presentation undermines moderation, modesty, and femininity. A woman writer cannot by definition therefore really be womanly (onnarashii). Once again we confront the double bind.

As Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley observe in their contribution in chapter 3, it is this “violation of cultural prescription that makes women writers susceptible to condemnatory charges of narcissism.” And yet, although women writers are derided for being self-centered and presumptuous, certain critics, like Mishima Yukio, denied women the capacity to engage in the narcissistic process that he regards as a necessary condition for literary creativity. Whereas selfishness may be feminine, self-consciousness is “utterly masculine” and “pre-supposes the separation of mind and body,” a talent that women lack. Or, again to quote Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, “It is less difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a woman to separate from her own self and regard herself objectively.” In other words, when the woman beholds her reflection in the mirror—veiled, rouged, or masked—she sees not herself (an insubstantial phantom at best) but the image of that which men desire.
Uno Chiyo, in her oft-cited autobiographical essay, “A Genius of Imitation” (Mohō no tensai, 1936), for example, acknowledges the way she self-consciously (if not subversively) refashioned herself to meet and retain the gaze of whatever man was in a position to give her what she desired—be it money, literary recognition, or companionship. On the one hand, her essay poignantly reveals the toll on women writers who feel obliged to submit to editorial expectations and then feel inauthentic when they do: imitators, performers, wives. Highly conscious of the expectations surrounding them, these women were not allowed to author their own texts—if “author” means to have authoritative control over their own writing—and in a sense were little more than the embodiment of what the male critic desired. On the other, she shows the coy strategies a woman writer might employ in negotiating that narrow but provocative space between expectation and feelings of authenticity.

The woman writer as a result has been constantly aware of a point of fissure in her creative enterprises—a fissure that opened between the artist she felt herself to be and what she needed to project in order to survive. The necessity of a literary persona, and the feelings of fissure that then ensue, are certainly not phenomena limited only to women writers. The mere act of exposing one’s personal work to public scrutiny requires bravado from any artist and results in varying degrees of masking and posturing. For the woman writer, however, the mask required was not necessarily one of her own making. It was too often a one-size-fits-all kind of apparel that all women had to wear, while men could choose among many. Moreover, the masks men were allowed were not as deeply fraught with sexual implications—with the threat to their chastity should they let the mask slip.

“How ludicrous it is that I act like a wife in my career as a writer,” Uno Chiyo’s “genius” complains. “I feel helpless even now, wondering how much longer I’ll continue this imitating. When I think about it, I get terribly discouraged, even in my proudest moments. . . . I am thirty-eight years old, I’ve been writing for twelve years, and I don’t know who I really am.”31 Transgressing daughter, sensational writer, or gentle wife, she is aware of the costuming she is required to don in order to secure access to print. She is also aware that the body behind the clothing, the face behind the mask—the raw flesh that Kawabata Yasunari and other men believed they perceived—was itself a fabrication.

The tension that arose from this point of fissure gave many a woman writer the energy she needed to fuel her creative enterprises. Whereas the subterfuges she felt forced to employ—the costumes and the masks—produced feelings of inauthenticity in some, they also provided a shiver of pleasure over the success of the charade. It was in this moment of fabrication, this subtle deception, that
many women writers of this era found a subversive—if entirely unintentional—retaliation.

The Resisting Woman Writer

Published critiques and cultural conventions were not the only means to containing a woman’s literary creativity and easing her into her mask. Women writers also learned about writing from reading works that were held up as exemplary, the recipients of literary accolades. Works by men. Of course, in the early twentieth century, women writers were enjoined to write like their Heian forebears. Japanese women writers had an illustrious history to draw on, after all—a history that was not only recognized but also—with the modern period—canonized. Although postwar women writers would find in their ancient foremothers sources of strength and symbols of resistance, for their nineteenth-century counterparts the success of their literary foremothers, as discussed above, was often more burden than encouragement.

Modern women learned to write by modeling men—not by echoing icons of past feminine brilliance. “My Mr. Strindberg, my Mr. Chekhov, and my Mr. Schnitzler,” Uno Chiyo’s “genius” intones. Earlier “the genius” had noted her desire to coopt the literary strategies of Takayama Chogyū and Satomi Ton and to borrow the glasses of her writer husband, Ozaki Shirō. Not only did female writers contrive to emulate their male peers, but female readers also found themselves drawn to the female characters populating male-authored texts.

Much is made in the essays under discussion, therefore, of the way members of one sex craft characters of the opposite sex. Men are said to reach the pinnacle of their careers when they are able to create a credible female character. But who, after all, has been responsible for determining the success of this creation if not men? Male critics decided—despite Kobayashi Hideo’s evaluation to the contrary—that Kawabata Yasunari’s female characters were not only believable, but that they also revealed the truth of womanness more accurately than even a woman herself. Women readers thus sought to internalize the images they found in his works. As Takahashi Takako noted in her 1978 discussion with Tsushima Yūko, “When women read his literature, they put on that female image like a mask... and read it. I suppose a woman typically reads Kawabata’s literature as if she were the object of a man’s gaze. Women have a surface that men look at, you know?” As the conversation continues, Takahashi describes the impact this mask had on her: “When I was young, I felt that way when I read. When I read a work written by a man that depicted a woman based on its author’s
analysis of female psychology, I would think, oh, this is how a woman is. And I would read on, completely accepting his analysis. But after I started writing novels and gradually began to be able to express myself as a subject, what male authors had taught me about women and I’d accepted as truth, I came to feel was somehow false.”

Echoing these observations in 1984, the writer Saegusa Kazuko suggested that the process of internalizing the mask was so subtle as to be hardly noticeable: “I came this far in my work without being very conscious about being a woman, and after reflecting on the true meaning of woman, I even thought that it would be quite detrimental to my writing if I worked with an awareness of being a woman. . . . However, as I made a conscious effort to think and write about women, it gradually became clear as to how much I had adjusted myself to fit men’s ideas and men’s ways of thinking.”

Notably, it is through the process of writing—of self-creation—that women came to recognize the presence of the mask they were wearing. In turn, it was through writing that they expressed their frustrations at its imposition. By the 1970s, Japanese women were admitting—loudly—that the female characters depicted in male-authored texts were hardly credible and the expectations placed on women hardly tenable. As Joan Ericson notes in her introduction to chapter 4, “The Resisting Woman Writer”: “By the mid-1970s, a cohort of college-educated women writers had reached a critical mass and explored a wide variety of approaches in fiction that, on the whole, could be considered more intellectual or ironic than those of earlier popular women writers. Many in this younger generation won the most prestigious literary prizes, thereby securing visibility and interest among an increasingly well-educated readership.”

Educated, enfranchised, and bolstered by what Ericson describes as “shifting global debates on women in advanced industrial societies,” these women were in a position to criticize as “public intellectuals” the effects of gender-based expectations on social, legal, and literary issues. Their writing offered a conduit to resistance. Whereas earlier women writers, like Uno Chiyo, had been more subtle in their protests, using subterfuges that were most successful when they were overlooked, the figures of resistance created by Takahashi, Tsushima, and other writers of their generation were overt. They openly challenged the images of feminine nature that had been encouraged by critics since the turn of the century. Paramount among these targeted images was, as scholar and critic Nakayama Kazuko suggested in 1986, “the myth of motherhood” and of woman as inherently nurturing.

What had been more intrinsic to the definition of woman than her biology and her assumed imperative to “mother”? Beyond biology, there was the so-
cial expectation that made the role of bearing and raising children a woman’s sole raison d’être. But as Nakayama argued, not only was this “myth of motherhood” a male construction that “shows itself in the male wish to return to the womb, the root of life,” it was also fundamentally the most problematic male paradigm of its kind—and the one to which women writers continued to return.  

Ohba Minako, Kōno Taeko, Tsushima Yūko, Takahashi Takako, and others challenged the myth of motherhood by indulging in extreme examples of “maternal animosity.” Creating female characters that kill, maim, or otherwise injure children, they violently disrupted expectations of an inherent “gentleness.” In pushing beyond the “normal” parameters of a “maternal nature,” these writers opened avenues to new human relationships that exceeded the sexual—or certainly the heterosexual. What would seem to be a terrifyingly negative treatment of the maternal engendered new ways of affirming female strength. Or to cite Nakayama, “a new maternal which differs from the maternal myth heretofore held by men who wished to return to the womb.”

Sharalyn Orbaugh in her 1996 essay, “The Body in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Fiction,” noted three strategies for writing against patriarchal paradigms. The first is descriptive. The woman writer “describe[s] the current configurations of power, exposing the harm done through them.” The second is to “invert the hierarchy of value, to valorize the object/passive side of the equation.” And the third is to “reverse the gender coding of the hierarchical power roles. Instead of being silent, women can speak; instead of being the objects of others’ gaze, they can use their eyes; instead of being killed, they can kill; instead of being dominated, they can dominate.” Of these different strategies, Orbaugh observed, the configuration of the hierarchies remains constant. That is, the hierarchical value of the binaries may be inverted, but the binaries themselves—male/female; dominator/dominated; voiced/unvoiced, etc.—remain intact.

Just as strategies for reading and writing women’s texts have changed, so too have the critics of these texts. Women themselves have moved to the forefront of literary criticism and are no longer limited by their sex to what and whom they critique. The change has been gradual, encouraged by postwar advances in educational and social opportunities for women and, according to scholars like Chieko Ariga, is still far from allowing women an equal share of the pie. Nevertheless, the changes are significant. In 1890 Wakamatsu Shizuko and Koganei Kimiko, the translators Kunikida Doppo heralded, refrained from commenting on contemporary Japanese literature (by their male peers) when responding to a survey designed to assess the views of current women writers. Whereas both were themselves receiving favorable evaluations (from men) for their creative writing and translations, they demurred from returning the favor.
on the basis that they were women. Their modesty was contagious. The survey had to be abandoned when other women writers declined to participate—citing illness, inconvenience, or lack of opinion. But with education and increased encouragement, women began to participate more readily in the critical evaluation of their literary peers. Miyamoto Yuriko, for example, is one of the first to have achieved recognition for her essays on both women’s writing and canonical male writers, such as Natsume Sōseki. Her achievements as a critic were subsequently exceeded by those of Itagaki Naoko, who, while also contributing significantly to Sōseki scholarship, was, in Tomoko Aoyama’s words, a pioneer in “foregrounding the otherwise overlooked writing of women in the early and mid-Shōwa period. She published critiques on the work of Hayashi Fumiko and Hirabayashi Taiko, in addition to an overview of women’s writing in modern Japan entitled Meiji Shōwa Taishō no joryū bungaku (Women’s writing in Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa, 1967).” Unlike Miyamoto and her reticent predecessors, Itagaki was a scholar and not herself a writer. Clearly ahead of her time in her focus on women’s writing as a category worthy of serious intellectual inquiry, she nevertheless was not able to escape the pull of a phallocentric approach to literary critique. Women’s writing, lacking the breadth and intellectual dynamism she ascribed to “great literature” written by men, had still not, in her estimation, reached its full potential. She summarizes the state of women’s writing to date as follows:

The works of women writers are conceptually simple. While their greatest asset is clearly their feminine sensibilities, it is this very factor that prevents their work from qualifying as great literature. We have seen growing numbers of university graduates among women who write, and there will no doubt continue to be an increase in the numbers of women writers and the quality of their work. The purpose of this current journal issue is to consider the limitations that have operated on women up until this point in order to provide a reference point for writers in the future. For, above all, women lack the ability to view the big picture. Thus their ability for objective composition and for detailed observation is limited, and they lack the insight to identify issues in the world around them. It is rare to find a woman with the ability to pursue a topic with intellectual persistence, rather than from an artless, superficial perspective. Scrutiny of the work of women writers reveals a dearth of understanding of creativity or associated issues. And while they may be capable of psychological analysis, few have the control or the discipline to follow this through. Nevertheless, the strong demand for femininity in literature means that the market is flooded with writing by women.
It should be noted, however, that the very best of these writers have opened territory unavailable to men. And their works are of the highest quality.44

Women Writers and Alternative Critiques

The opened territory to which Itagaki refers inspired the experimentation of the 1970s and 1980s by writers such as Tsushima and Takahashi, as noted above. This experimentation, in turn, led to a trend among critics and writers to move beyond the restrictive limits of binaries. Amanda Seaman, in introducing the ramifications of these “alternative” critiques, states that “the critics . . . argue for a new form of literary (and by extension social) analysis that can overcome the shortcomings of masculine readings of women and their literature by considering that literature on its own terms, uncovering its unique history, and freeing women and their writing from the confines of patriarchy and its heterosexual presuppositions.” Mizuta Noriko, for example, in her essay on “trans/gender/lation” offers a critical “bisexuality” as a new strategy for freeing reading discourses from the either/or of male/female and original/imitative. Mizuta’s creative use of terms like “bisexualism” reveals the new stages to which she and her colleagues have taken feminist literary criticism in Japan. Not only do these critics challenge the binaries of gender, but they also challenge the imposition of elitist evaluations, thus opening the gates of the literary kingdom to a more diverse and popular variety of writing. Saitō Minako, for example, invites the “serious” consideration of the popular by introducing us to the importance of “girl culture” in spawning “women’s writing.” Girl culture, like the strength in women’s voices, has remained an undercurrent—ignored and hidden but provocatively powerful. “If one-tenth of the effort these critics devoted to their serious study of the ‘intertextuality’ in Murakami Haruki’s works had been dedicated to the study of Banana’s intertextual context, they would have detected a history of girl culture that has been running as an undercurrent throughout modern history.”45 Takahara Eiri takes us beyond sex by turning us all into girls. “I am not referring here only to real girls, for it is not necessary to be an actual girl; rather we need to be like a girl. In order to highlight this point, I intend to refer to the texts under discussion as ‘girl consciousness’ literature.” The reader position that Takahara advocates is one that disrupts the rigidity of conventional gender categories. The position of a girl—a peripheral position yet untainted by strict gender codes—“discredits adult thinking and is implicitly critical of adult thoughtlessness and insensitivity.”46 By opening the binaries, Takahara allows the play of a much more creative reading. In the process, a writer like Kawabata Yasunari becomes not just a man who under-
stands women better than they do themselves, but a man with a “girl’s consciousness.” Here he is no different than certain women writers. Finally, in her poetic essay, “For a Gentle Castration,” Matsuura Rieko liberates us from our gendered bodies altogether.

A Literary Coda: Women Writers Critiquing Men

This volume opens with a chapter that includes a spirited discussion by men critiquing women writers. It concludes with a similarly spirited discussion by women critiquing men. The parallels between the two are striking. As has been noted, both lapse into moments of condescension and essentialism. The difference lies in the positions of the critics relative to the subject they are critiquing. The male critics in the early twentieth century were presiding over the center, maintaining the borders of the *bundan*, and ensuring the peripheral nature of those on the outside. Female critics, even in the late twentieth century, are still on the outside, and it is this outsider position that makes their flip assessments of male writers particularly antagonistic. Relishing their rebellious stance, Ueno Chizuko urges other female critics to join the fray: “We have cast the first stone of feminist criticism into the pond of literature. If the subsequent ripples provoke more experiments of greater variety and depth, we will have achieved our goal.”

Women writers and poets such as Tomioka Taeko and Kōra Rumiko remain active in keeping feminist critical discourses at the surface of the literary pond. They have been joined by dynamic and outspoken women scholar-critics—for example, Watanabe Sumiko, Nakayama Kazuko, Tanaka Miyoko, Komashaku Kimi, Egusa Mitsuko, Seki Reiko, Yonaha Keiko, Kitada Sachie. The number of women with appointments as literature scholars in Japanese universities, whereas still lagging behind that for men, continues to grow, as does their interest in proclaiming themselves feminist scholars of “women’s studies.” The field is now so vibrant and diverse that it is impossible to name all the important contributors, let alone feature examples of criticism from each. Among them, surely the most notable is the aforementioned Mizuta Noriko, whose work on gender and literature—here represented by the essay on “Trans/gender/lation”—has made a significant contribution to pushing feminist literary criticism into the mainstream.

NOTES

3. Tomioka, “‘Onna no kotoba’ to ‘kuni no kotoba,’” p. 93. As translated by Joan E. Ericson in chapter 4 below.


5. Woolf, “Professions for Women,” p. 285. “Professions for Women” is based on a speech Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service on January 21, 1931. In the speech she introduced her encounters with the Angel of the House by noting the way she interfered with Woolf’s first review of a man’s book. The Angel did not find it appropriate for a young woman to criticize the work of a man.

6. Joryū sakka translates literally to “woman-style writer.” For more on this expression, refer to Joan E. Ericson’s essay in this volume and to her “The Origins of the Concept of ‘Women’s Literature.’”


9. The term bundan was used initially to describe male writers and critics of the Meiji and early Taishō periods who belonged to an exclusive Tokyo coterie. Eventually it came to refer to a broader establishment of writers and incorporate a greater sense of canonicity. Bundan writers, almost exclusively male, were those who sat on editorial and prize committees; who were in positions to advance or mentor the careers of other writers; and who, in their capacity as critics, determined who was or was not a member of the bundan. For more on the bundan and the impact it had on women’s writing, see Ariga, “Dephallicizing Women in Ryūkyō shin-shi.

10. As Laurel Rasplica Rodd points out in her translation of Yosano Akiko’s essay in this volume onnarashisa is not just being womanly but also acting womanly.


12. The presumed chasteness of Murasaki Shikibu et al. is notable. Contemporary Izumi Shikibu was known for her liaisons with several prominent men, Sei Shōnagon was thought to be something of a flirt, and Murasaki herself was nicknamed “Miss Japanese Chronicles” because of her ostentatious bookishness. It is interesting that in seeking precursors and models for Meiji women writers, critics would reach far back into the Heian era (794–1185) while ignoring those of the more recent Tokugawa era (1600–1868). Atsuko Sakaki suggests a political motive: “Women’s literature from the Tokugawa period has been conveniently forgotten in order to invent the notion of women’s liberation in modern Japan, and to uncritically and ahistorically bridge Heian court culture of the tenth to the eleventh centuries (epitomized by Murasaki Shikibu . . .) and modern capitalist culture” (“Sliding Door,” p. 4).


15. Ibid., p. 40.

16. Such was Ishibashi Shian’s 1888 advice to Miyake Kaho, whose debut piece suggested too direct a knowledge of the underclass. See ibid., p. 89.

18. See, for example, Ozaki, “Japanese Women Novelists Today,” or Nakamura, “Hayashi
Fumiko ron,” p. 95.
in chapter 1 below.
20. Preface to Yoshiya, Joryū sakka jikkasen.
chapter 2 below.
by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley in chapter 3 below.
Barbara Hartley in chapter 2 below.
28. Yukiko Tanaka, introduction to This Kind of Woman, p. ix.
32. Ibid.
33. Takahashi and Tushima, “Onna no sei to otoko no me,” p. 5. As translated by Maryellen
Toman Mori in chapter 4 below.
34. Ibid., p. 6.
35. This quote is taken from the article by Nakayama Kazuko that is translated by Joan E.
Ericson and Yoshiko Nagaoka in chapter 4 of this volume. For the original source, see “Onna
gawa watashi shōsetsu wo kaku toki” (When women write confessional literature), in Saegusa,
Sayōnara okoto no jidai, pp. 128–132.
36. In my essay, “The Made-Up Author,” I discuss the way Uno succeeded in convincing
male critics of her omnaraoshia while at the same time subverting social expectations: “In order
to become a writer in a man’s world, Uno had to don a mask of femininity, and it was a mask
she had to learn to change as befitted the moment—now devoted wife, now elegant flapper... .
Iironically then, by concealing her true female self to avoid charges of ‘masculinity,’ she creates
a face for herself which is in essence a ‘male’ construct in that it is a reflection of a male-defined
femininity” (p. 15).
37. Nakayama, “Joryū bungaku to sono ishiki henkaku no shudai.” As translated by Joan E.
Ericson and Yoshiko Nagaoka in chapter 4 below.
38. Ibid., p. 38.
39. Adrienne Hurley notes that Ohba is the romanization the author herself prefers (over
the more conventional “Ôba”). I am here following the precedent set by Hurley. See Hurley,
original.
42. See Chieko Ariga, “Text versus Commentary.”
43. Unpublished letter to the editor.
45. Saitō, “Yoshimoto Banana shōjo karuchā no suimyaku,” p. 86. As translated by Eiji Sekine in chapter 3 below.