CHAPTER 1

Nun Abutsu and Women’s Writing in Medieval Japan

This book traces the life and works of an extraordinary thirteenth-century woman who is known today as Nun Abutsu. Abutsu was born in 1225 into the elite social echelon of courtiers who lived in what is now Kyoto, and she died in 1283 while residing in the new, warrior-based political center of Kamakura. She worked at the court of a princess and eventually married the most politically influential poet of her time. Compared with many medieval women, she led a privileged life, yet she also suffered through hardships, including self-imposed exile at a nunnery and destitution as a single mother.

Abutsu garnered attention and literary success by capitalizing on her exceptional talents as a poet, scholar, and teacher. She left a wealth of records—memoirs, poetry, scholarship, instructional manuals, and prayers—that reveal the most detailed and intimate portrait, perhaps, of any woman of the medieval era. Though her achievements stand out in literary history, she is best understood not as an anomaly but as someone who epitomized the capable attendant and the savvy wife and who was able to leverage her abilities for personal, political, and financial gain. Abutsu’s particular skills as a poet, writer, and expert on The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari, ca. 1010) were among those most valued within medieval aristocratic society, and they enabled her to navigate the competitive world of court salons and to participate in her husband’s household occupation of producing and teaching the Way of Poetry.

As a court attendant, mother, nun, scholar, teacher, wife, and widow, Abutsu represents many of the paths taken by medieval aristocratic women. This book traces Abutsu’s life through her own works and the writings of her contemporaries and asks what her career and the texts she produced tell us about thirteenth-century Japanese women. To uncover Abutsu’s life, I rely heavily on texts that she authored, some of which were intended to faith-
fully record events and experiences, but all of which contain elements of fictionality. Abutsu is unusual as a premodern woman whose life is well documented through numerous extant sources, including commentaries and legal documents. Official records may offer names and dates, but the most intimate and detailed descriptions are found in her own memoirs and travel diaries. Abutsu wrote these works at different points in her life with specific personal, political, and literary aims, and the texts thus present divergent self-characterizations—images like the pining lover, the consummate court attendant, and the loyal widow. Such characterizations tell us about particular periods in Abutsu’s life, her efforts to improve her status, the feminine roles and literary models she used to frame her self-narratives, and the gendered discourses in which she wrote. Since the most revealing perspectives on her life are found in her autobiographical works and the writings of her rivals, it is not possible to separate Abutsu’s fictional persona from her historical personage. In reconstructing her life from the diaries, travel records, prayers, letters, and appeals that she wrote—even when alternate sources are sought—our understanding is naturally skewed by what Abutsu recorded.

Despite the semifictional aspect of sources on Abutsu, over the past seven hundred years scholars have often tried to pin down her “true” character, some hailing her as an exemplary wife and mother and others proclaiming her an evil, scheming woman. As evidence of her character, some scholars cite Abutsu’s glowing self-characterization in her travel diary, while others point to the denunciations of her found in the records of poetic rivals. The danger of reading any of Abutsu’s work literally is that each performs other tasks while chronicling her life. Her travel diary, for example, defends her stance in a legal case, demonstrates her poetic prowess to potential patrons, idealizes her role as a widow and mother, and vilifies her rivals. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have noted, when life narrators write they are “making ‘history,’” yet they are also “performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures among others.”¹ Like other life narratives, Abutsu’s memoirs fulfill specific goals for the author while also functioning as literary works that respond to set generic conventions and cultural expectations.

If we accept that Abutsu’s autobiographical self is a fictive structure and that others similarly had vested interests in how they represented her, instead of evaluating her historicity and determining who she was, we can ask what these sources reveal of how she and other women of her time lived.² These questions must be considered not only through the content presented in materials on Abutsu’s life but also in terms of the style
and intent of these works and the conditions in which they were written. Rather than simply mining the sources for information, we must question why Abutsu wrote as she did and what motivated others to write about her. Thus, by mapping the career of Abutsu and analyzing her writings within the historical contexts in which they were produced, this study delineates the limits of what was possible for well-positioned and talented women of medieval Japan, an era traditionally associated with masculine images.

**Medieval Literature**

Japan’s medieval period (the late twelfth through sixteenth centuries) is today commonly viewed as an era of incessant warfare in which the samurai rose to power while the court elite was gradually marginalized. The male-authored military chronicles of this period, canonized as distinctly medieval by later readers, focus on the power struggles between men of various factions. Whether tales of retribution such as *The Tale of the Soga Brothers* or stories depicting the trials of the defeated such as *The Tale of the Heike*, filial piety, political intrigue, and battles figure prominently in popular representations of the medieval era. While women do appear in these retellings of warrior accomplishment, they are relegated to minor roles within the cultural imagination.

Women play a more significant role in other genres (which they often had a greater role in producing) such as diaries (*nikki*) and Japanese poetry (*waka*). Although works in these genres focus on the life of the aristocracy, they also depict women toiling in rice fields, selling goods and providing entertainment along transport routes, practicing at convents, and working at palaces and residences. Other historical, literary, and visual sources, including anecdotes (*setsuwa*), confirm that many women had careers and actively took part in cultural life. At the bottom of the socioeconomic scale were menial laborers, farmers, and traveling peddlers. Courtesans, entertainers, and artisans were social chameleons whose status varied according to their talents and their associations with powerful patrons. A courtesan, for example, could rise in the social hierarchy by becoming the concubine of a high-ranking man. At the top of the scale were members of the court elite and ruling warrior government.

Women within the highest ranks of court society were literate and wrote both prose and poetry. These female writers were born into the upper echelon of society as noblewomen who held more in common with men of similar pedigree than with the majority of women from classes below them. Those ranking highest and with the most political and economic power
were the wives and daughters of emperors, many of whom acted as imperial patrons, hosting salons that fostered female writers. At the lower end of the hierarchy of court women were the daughters of men employed by the imperial court, such as Nun Abutsu, the subject of this book. They produced literary works across a range of genres, including diaries, tales, travel records, and poetry collections.

The diaries written by these court women have, since the 1920s, been separated from the larger body of works by men and women and have been categorized as a separate genre of “women’s diary literature” (joryū nikki bungaku), a category linked to ideals of self-reflection (jishō), confession (zange), and lyricism (jojō). This segregation of women’s writing and prizing of a confessional style has resulted in certain works being hailed as exemplary of women’s diary literature, such as the Kagerō Diary (Kagerō nikki, ca. 974), the Diary of Izumi Shikibu (Izumi Shikibu nikki, ca. 1008), and the Murasaki Shikibu Diary (Murasaki Shikibu nikki, 1010). In contrast to these memoirs, which are seen as representing the unembellished, internal sentiments of their authors, works that focus on historical events instead of a personal odyssey have received short shrift. In Japanese literary studies, medieval women have been largely ignored and their works seen as poor imitations of the preceding female tradition—too conventional and lacking in lyricism and self-reflection. Thus the diaries, poetry collections, and tales written by women of the medieval period remain largely untapped, despite their value as literature and as sources that reveal how aristocratic women continued to write in times of change.

When these sources are approached as windows into women’s lives, it is important to remember that each form of writing, whether a love letter or an offertory prayer, carried with it set conventional expectations. Abutsu tailored her arguments to the literary genres in which she wrote by framing her content in accordance with stylistic limitations and her anticipated readers. Abutsu’s mastery of various genres allowed her to argue for her own interests and appeal to her readers by capitalizing on the particular nuances of each genre. In compiling career advice for her daughter, she presented it in the form of a letter embodying a humble stance and a personal tone. The epistolary format allowed Abutsu to pass on her vast knowledge of court etiquette and guide her daughter toward career success without containing her advice within the strictures of a didactic manual. Moreover, it enabled Abutsu to openly praise her daughter and delineate her capabilities, despite anticipating that the work might circulate among others at court. In contrast, in the memoir depicting her youth, Abutsu draws heavily from the conventions of romance narratives in positioning
herself as a spurned lover. The work focuses on the decline of a relationship, the possibility of nunhood, and the potential for self-transformation through travel. As a form of self-writing by a court woman with a love story at its core, the memoir uses poetic conventions and romantic notions that would have been familiar to any aristocratic reader, such as the seasonal nature of love, the inevitable fading of ardor, and the terminal stage of lamentation and reflection in a relationship. These are tropes found not only in literary romances but also in sequences of poetry, as Abutsu and her readers were keenly aware.

Through her poetry, Abutsu presents herself as quick witted, well versed in rhetorical strategies, and able to adapt to the stylistic ideals of the lineage into which she married. Abutsu’s poems demonstrate her command of poetic traditions, vast knowledge of the classics, and versatility in adapting to the particular contexts in which she wrote. As she notes in the instructions to her daughter, court attendants were expected to respond swiftly to poems and to engage in witty repartee with those visiting their patrons. Records of her participation in poetry gatherings show that she was able to meet this ideal of the clever serving woman who could deftly handle words. Poetry was a highly valued art, a practical professional tool, and a necessary skill for romance that Abutsu utilized skillfully to prove her literary capabilities and subtly convey her perspective. It was poetry and her understanding of *The Tale of Genji*—another skill useful for poetic composition—that cemented her position as wife to the most influential poet of her time.

Abutsu’s travel diary can similarly be seen as a demonstration of her poetic prowess. For a courtier, the act of travel was linked to a history of poetic narratives that typically depicted journeys from the capital and the desire to return. Each major stop along the travel route was associated with set images that had come to represent the location through a historical accretion of poems from past literary travelers. The form of a travel diary determined that the author would stop at a number of set sites along a route and that he or she would compose poems appropriating tropes for which the site was famous. Travel (whether actual or imagined) could thus act as an exercise in poetic practice.

As I have shown in this brief overview of the major genres in which Abutsu wrote, each genre—letter, memoir, poetry, and travel diary—was accompanied by readerly expectations and literary traditions that limited the form and content and encouraged various rhetorical strategies. Abutsu wrote within these limitations, yet she often pushed the genre boundaries to better meet her immediate needs by framing, for example, a legal appeal as a series of poems within a travel diary. Literary conventions were only one
of the constraints that determined how Abutsu could write; she was also confined by her gender, rank, and class. The status of aristocratic women, their ability to secure long-term employment, and their prospects for financial security shifted over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, impacting women’s opportunities for patronage. The changes in the institutional practices at court salons and within households suggest how women had to reposition themselves in order to survive professionally, politically, and financially.

**Changing Times**

Institutional transformations during the medieval era altered the social status of women and created the basis for a system of family organization (known as the “household system” or *ie-seido*) that continues to exist in adapted form today.\(^{10}\) From the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, opportunities for employment and patronage declined and the role of women at court decreased in significance. As the court gradually lost political and economic power, women became reliant on fathers and husbands for financial stability, and their literary production suffered. Scholars of women’s history have noted how the Kamakura period (1185–1333) began an era marked by the rise of Confucian notions of womanhood, a shift toward patriarchal models of the household, a reconfiguration of marital and inheritance practices into those favoring a singular male heir, and the loss of economic independence for women, which was accompanied or precipitated by a decrease in patronage opportunities.\(^{11}\) It was not just women who lost out—certainly, male courtiers also had to find innovative ways of supporting themselves—but the reduced status of medieval women stands out because of the so-called flowering of literature that came before and the seemingly stark contrast of what follows.

During the Heian period (794–1185), women of the provincial governor class (or *shirabyō*) were largely responsible for the blossoming of Japanese literature composed in the vernacular.\(^{12}\) In their youth, these women were usually sent to serve as attendants to members of the imperial family. The salons, such as those of Emperor Ichijō’s (980–1011; r. 986–1011) consorts, were a source of sponsorship for the literary activities that flourished during this time. Women such as Sei Shōnagon (ca. 964–after 1027) and Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–ca. 1014) were able to produce autobiographies or epic narratives as contributions to the salons of their respective patrons, Teishi (976–1000) and Shōshi (988–1074). The court of the mid-Kamakura period, however, was no longer the dynamic center for literary activity that
it had been in the Heian period. Women’s records of service at court, such as GoFukakusa-in Nijō’s (1258–?) diary, The Unrequested Tale (Towazugatari, ca. 1306), evoke the grim reality of Kamakura court politics and the financial and social restraints that were influencing the lives of noblewomen.13

Land reforms enacted by the Kamakura bakufu assigned military stewards to estates and limited courtier control over income from land holdings. With fewer resources, court patronage decreased and men gradually began to replace women in their posts at court. After usurping women’s roles as scribes and attendants in palace offices, men came to hold posts in areas that were traditionally limited to women, such as in the imperial kitchen and in birth preparations.14 Women without court posts were left with three possible paths: They could work for court or warrior families as serving women, marry, or take the tonsure.15 As Abutsu’s life shows, these options were not mutually exclusive. Many women continued to serve a patron throughout their lives in tandem with marriage, childbirth, and widowhood.

The new marital and inheritance practices that placed authority in the hands of the husband resulted in married women losing much of their financial autonomy.16 This contrasted with the earlier practices of the Heian period, when a woman might transition through several forms of residence within a relationship to the same man, depending on the relative status of the woman and man, whether the woman was a primary or secondary wife, and the economic capabilities of the respective families to provide a residence. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it was common for the wife’s family to provide a residence for the couple, either as an uxorilocal living arrangement within the wife’s family residence or as a neolocal residence supplied by her family. By the late twelfth century, the wife no longer lived in a residence prepared for the couple by her own family but was adopted into her husband’s household (yometori-kon) and lived in a dwelling that he and his family supplied.17 Her assets became the property of her husband and could not be passed on to female kin. Women now formed part of a patriarchal, corporate household unit (ie) in which their most valued role was that of producing a male heir, and motherhood became one of the few avenues through which women could access power. Despite there being increasingly limited means of asserting economic authority, women continued to hold positions of prestige within the confines of their households and were important contributors to the economic and cultural activities of the household.

The unit of organization that took hold within courtier families over the course of the twelfth century was one in which the household became the
locus for both production and reproduction. In other words, the activities of administering and carrying out the family’s profession and the reproduction of heirs (who would further the family vocation) both took place within the household. Moreover, the household consisted not only of family members but also closely affiliated underlings and attendants who served the family from generation to generation. As the principal wife of a household head, a woman could hold considerable power as a household manager and mother to its heirs. Women thus aspired to marriage with an influential courtier as a principal or even secondary wife.

A woman of the aristocracy who was born into a family in the capital would typically be educated at home and then sent to the court of an imperial patron, where she received further training in skills ranging from poetic composition and textual interpretation to interior decoration and the tailoring of clothing. If successful in her career at court, she might eventually receive the attentions of a prince, emperor, or retired emperor and bear him offspring or raise the stature of her family by marrying someone of higher rank who would ensure that their children rose in rank and post. But not all women employed at court secured long-term patronage or married up, and nunhood was an option if all else failed or if an alternative to court life was sought. This decision to become a nun might be motivated by religious fervor, but it also enabled greater physical, social, and financial autonomy and was seen by some women as a path to personal freedom. Theoretically at least, the act of taking the tonsure placed a woman outside the sexual economy and thus enabled her to travel with greater ease. As an itinerant nun, she could wear a simple robe, hood, and vestment and stop at inns for journeying pilgrims and clergy. Land rights could be ascribed to nuns and their convents, and medieval inheritance documents record the important role played by nuns in receiving land and allotting it to other women. After the death of a husband, it was common for his primary wife (seisai) and closest retainer to take the tonsure. This was a moral statement of loyalty to a spouse or patron, but it also meant that the widow gained legal and economic access to rights enshrined by her status as a “widow nun” (gote ama). At a time when women became increasingly reliant on men for support, becoming a nun after the death of a spouse was a logical choice made by most aristocratic women.

Medieval Women and Literary Production

As institutional transformations took place at court, the literary field, too, was being reinvented with new approaches by clients and patrons to spon-
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Sorship, commissions, and transmission of artistic skill and teachings. Steven Carter and Robert Huey have delineated examples of this: increased professionalization of the arts, competition over sources of patronage, the rise of rival claims to poetic authority, and a resulting splintering of literary houses. Women poets who took part in literary activities had to navigate this new literary terrain to connect with patrons and create new audiences. Female writers were bound within a male-dominated sphere of cultural production, yet they were also able to work within such limitations, by composing together with men at poetry gatherings, for example. The range of Abutsu’s activities as a poet, scholar, and mentor and the wealth of works she authored demonstrate what could be accomplished under the right circumstances.

Invariably, successful women writers can be linked to influential men and women who provided them access to sources of power and patronage. Some were members of the imperial family, such as Eifukumon-in (1271–1342); others were married to highly placed courtiers and bakufu affiliates or worked within wealthy salons. Kamakura-era women writers include diarists receiving the support of imperial patrons, such as the accomplished court attendant Kengozen (1157–ca. 1226); the attendant to Emperor GoFukakusa (1243–1304; r. 1246–1259), Ben no Naishi (1220s–ca. 1270); Lady Nijō, who served the retired GoFukakusa as his lover and attendant; and Nakatsukasa Naishi (fl. ca. 1252–1292), who worked for Retired Emperor Fushimi (1265–1317; r. 1287–1298). The diarist Hino Mei shi (fl. ca. 1330–1350) was married to the high-ranking courtier and later thwarted (and executed) politician Saionji Kinnune (1310–1335). There were numerous poets who were linked to influential lineages that provided them with prestige and supportive households in which to practice and produce poetry. The Daughter of Shunzei (ca. 1171–ca. 1252), the Daughter of Teika (1195–?), and Nun Abutsu were backed by the Mikohidari literary household and educated by its male heirs Shunzei (1114–1204), Teika (1162–1241), and Tameie (1198–1275). Kyōgoku Tameko (?–1316), who is seen as contributing an innovative approach to medieval poetics, was supported by her brother, the poet and imperial anthology editor Kyōgoku Tamekane (1254–1332) and trained by her grandfather Tameie. The familial and marital ties of these women show that the affiliation and backing of well-placed men was necessary in order for them to succeed, though educational and material aid could also be found through female patrons. The female diarists, poets, and tale authors canonized as writers of the Kamakura period were exceptional in their attainment of cultural and literary acclaim, but their paths reveal the aspirations shared by many elite noblewomen of their time.
What do these successful cases tell us about the shifting status of women during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? How did some women manage to write and why were there works read and copied? What do their literary records reveal about their lives and livelihoods? This book will attempt to answer such questions by tracing the literary history of one medieval woman, now known as Nun Abutsu (Abutsu-ni). Abutsu, as noted, left a wealth of literary records, and her life is comparatively well documented within historical sources. Although there are other aristocratic women who produced private poetry collections, travel journals, and records of court life, Abutsu was extremely prolific and varied in her writings. Extant works by her include a memoir, a travel diary, a career guide for women, a poetic manual, prayers, private poetry collections, and forty-eight waka poems in imperial collections. Her life is also relatively well documented in legal records, the complaints of rivals, entries from other diarists, records of poetry matches (utaawase), and assessments of her scholarship by contemporaries. Not only did she write across many genres, but she broke gender barriers in doing so. She was the first woman to produce a treatise on poetic theory (karon) and to record an advice manual for women serving at court, just two of her many works that continued to be passed on for generations.

In examining Abutsu’s works, I will place her writings in the context of her life and consider how and why she produced them and what they tell us about the lives of women in thirteenth-century Japan. This approach will enable me to examine her diaries, letters, poems, poetic theory, and scholarship outside the genre strictures that have led scholars to devalue her works and have thus limited further study. In contextualizing Abutsu’s life, I will draw upon a wave of women’s history research produced in Japan in the 1980s, which developed in response to the pathbreaking work of Takamure Itsue (1894–1964). Takamure was the first Japanese scholar to examine the marriage practices and the notion of love within the court elite of premodern Japan using historical documents and court tales. Though Takamure has been dismissed as an amateur focused on reclaiming a utopia for women that she believed existed in ancient Japan, she effectively established the field of women’s history through her studies. Present leaders in the field, such as Wakita Haruko (1934–) and Tabata Yasuko (1941–), have expanded on Takamure’s work using a greater body of data to assert that the ie household system did not take hold until the fourteenth century and to show that there were numerous exceptions to male inheritance patterns within both courtier and warrior families.

Scholars of women’s history continue to debate when and in what ways women lost physical, social, and financial autonomy. While the household
system and new inheritance practices can be traced to the late Heian or early Kamakura period, their adoption varied depending on class, lineage, and even family practices. In her diary *Takemukigaki* (literally, the record of one “Facing the Bamboo,” composed after 1349), Hino Meishi describes two forms of marriage with the same husband—the first a wife-visiting arrangement (*tsumadoi-kon*) and the second an adoption into his household. Examples such as this show the need to look beyond historical trends to individual cases. Abutsu’s works will thus be used to map out her life, to illuminate what such prominent examples tell us about the transformations taking place in courtier women’s lives, and to consider how and why she chose to represent herself as she did.

**What’s in a Name?**

Understanding who Abutsu was requires a comprehension of the various appellations she used and how these shifted through her life. Before turning to the content of the individual chapters of this book, I will briefly describe the significance of the court-based system of rank and title and its relation to an aristocratic woman’s origins, her post at court, and her affiliation with influential courtiers. Earlier in this introduction, I considered the various classes of women depicted in literature and the presence of the imperial family and the court elite at the top of the social hierarchy, yet even within the aristocracy, courtiers were categorized within a highly stratified system of rank and post. Women who served at court were assigned appellations based on their rank, and thus many extant sources refer to Abutsu by one of the names she used at court: Ankamon-in no Shijō.

In the thirteenth century, rank and title were still largely determined according to one’s lineage and one’s immediate political backing at court. Writing one hundred years before Abutsu joined the salon of Ankamon-in (1209–1283), the Daughter of Sugawara no Takasue (1008–?) notes in the *Sarashina Diary* (Sarashina niki, ca. 1059) how a parent’s rank affects treatment at court: “If my father had a more important position, perhaps my state would not be so hopeless. While thinking such unfulfilling thoughts, my father was at long last given a post, but he was sent to the distant eastern provinces.” In Abutsu’s time, it was still the father’s (or other male backer’s) rank that primarily influenced a child’s position at court when sent to court as an attendant. A woman’s reception there, the designation of her post, and the determination of her court name (*nyōbō na*, or more literally, her “attendant name”) were all directly linked to the influence of her father and the support she received from his network of contacts at court.
Based on Emperor Juntoku’s (1197–1242; r. 1210–1221) *Secret Selections* (Kinpishō, ca. 1221), a work that outlines court protocol, Tsunoda Bun’ei describes how court names were applied in the Kamakura period: “The ranking of female attendants became standardized based on their status and their lineage, and promotion was rare. When they first appeared at court, women serving the Retired Emperor were ranked according to their family line as upper (jōrō), sub-upper (kojōrō), middle (chūrō), and lower (gerō) attendants.”

As a female attendant, or *nyōbō*, a woman would be assigned a name derived from a province or avenue. The “street names” (*kōji na*) were originally ranked in the late twelfth century during the rule of GoToba (1180–1219; r. 1183–1198). The appellations Ichijō, Nijō, Sanjō, Konoe, Horikawa, and Kasuga were among the street names reserved for the highest echelon of serving women, the *jōrō*. Even these highest designations were ranked within a hierarchy in which Ichijō (First Avenue) was at the top, Nijō next, and Sanjō (Third Avenue) following.

If the *Genshō waka kuden* (Genshō’s Oral Transmission of Japanese Poetry, ca. 1293–1299) is correct, Abutsu was initially referred to by the title Echizen, a highly ranked province among the provincial names used as sobriquets for serving women. She seems to have been called Echizen only for a short period of time, before gaining the *nyōbō* name of Uemon no Suke. The *ShokuKokinshū* (Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems Continued, 1265) and other works identify Abutsu’s poetry as the work of Uemon no Suke. By 1276, she was referred to as Ankamon-in no Shijō, the name that the majority of contemporary literary works use to refer to Abutsu. The *ShokuShūishū* (Collection of Gleanings Continued, 1278), for example, lists Abutsu’s poetry under the authorship of Ankamon-in no Shijō. Records of poetry matches, such as the *Munetaka Shinno sanbyakushu* (Prince Munetaka’s Three Hundred–Poem Sequences, 1260), indicate Abutsu’s score beside a shorthand version of her name consisting only of the character “four” (*shi*) of Shijō.

Although initial rank, post, and official appellation were determined by family lineage and ties to the patron, a woman could certainly work her way up the ladder of court hierarchy, and the transformations in Abutsu’s court names are a result of her gradual rise in stature at the salon of Ankamon-in. The name of Echizen, while ranking high among the province designations, was only high enough to be categorized within the middle-ranking attendants (chūrō). When she was renamed Uemon no Suke, Abutsu moved to the high end of the middle ranks, and finally, when she was referred to as Shijō, she reached the sub-upper category of kojōrō. Some literary
works also call her the “Nun of Hokurin” (Hokurin zenni), a reference to her residence located in the northern woods (hokurin) of the capital in the Saga region. Within present scholarship, she is identified as the Nun Abutsu (Abutsu-ni) or just Abutsu, her tonsured name and the moniker that will be used in this book.

Characterizing Nun Abutsu

Abutsu is now known primarily as a compelling historical figure—in the words of Edwin Reischauer, she was “a great personality.” If contemporary representations of Abutsu are to be believed, she was a loving mother, an ideal wife, and a woman blessed with talent and determination. Writing in 1969, the literary scholar Fukuda Hideichi described her as follows:

Abutsu’s personality can be easily surmised based on her personal history and literary works. In short, she had double the will power and sentiment of others. From her own works, the diary of [Asukai] Masaari, and her relations with [Fujiwara no] Tameie, we can infer that she had abundant literary talents and was an extremely gifted kind of person. In this regard, unlike the women of the Heian court who simply followed their fate, she is an active Kamakura-era type of woman, who, for better or worse, determined her own destiny. If we were to seek similar historical examples, then women like Hōjō Masako would be close.

Fukuda’s description of Abutsu concludes with the notion that she represents a new type of woman that developed in the Kamakura period, a woman whose determination and strong-willed manner contrasted greatly with her Heian predecessors. This hints at another common view of Abutsu and women who held political influence—as conniving, overly ambitious women who use the system to their advantage. Drawing upon the writings of Abutsu’s son-in-law and rival Genshō (1224–1303), the historian Seno Seiichirō titles his assessment “The Evil Woman Abutsu” (Akujo Abutsu-ni) and describes Abutsu as “a compassionate woman with a checkered background of amorous relationships” who made “various selfish demands” of her husband Tameie, whom she eventually “put under her thumb.”

The notion of Abutsu as an evil woman fits into a larger paradigm of the scheming, meddlesome medieval woman, a model that has been applied to other women who held political authority or figured prominently in history, such as Hōjō Masako (1157–1225) and Hino Tomiko (1440–1496). Martin Colclutt has noted how Hōjō Masako is represented as “a woman
warrior’ (onna-jōfu), ‘man-crusher’ (otoko masari), ‘jealous shrew’ (yakimochi yaki), ‘the woman who sat on her husband’ (otto o shiri ni hiku onna), and the ‘unruly woman’ (kanfu). Medieval women who held any form of political and economic authority tend to be seen as appropriating the power of men. Collcutt attributes this view to Edo period (1603–1867) scholars who were unable to accept that women may have held actual political influence. Unfortunately, it is a notion that still holds sway today. Abutsu is now hailed as an icon of motherly love, which is a more culturally acceptable way of interpreting her power, but it is also an image she sought to promote as it enabled her to argue for her rights as a wife and mother. The problem with making claims about Abutsu’s character is that her “personality” is one derived from her own works and a few references found in sources written by male courtiers. Abutsu no doubt had various goals in mind and a clear notion of intended audience when she wrote her works. This is the case for her son-in-law Genshō, too, whose derision of Abutsu must be read within the context of his intent to remain closely allied to Tameie’s son and expected heir to the Mikohidari lineage, Tameuji (1222–1286). Similarly, Asukai Masaari’s (1241–1301) praise for Abutsu dovetails with his desire to ingratiate himself with Abutsu’s husband Tameie, who was acting as mentor to the up-and-coming poet and scholar. While these representations of Abutsu’s character may be one sided, they provide a sense of her interactions with other scholars and poets, her literary activities, and the degree to which she may have influenced others. If we bear in mind the circumstances under which these texts were produced, then the various historical and literary materials about Abutsu provide an unusually broad spectrum of sources about what it meant to be a medieval aristocratic woman.

Abutsu’s own works have tended to be read literally: Fitful Slumbers (Uta-tane, ca. 1265) as the lamentation of a heartbroken teenager and Diary of the Sixteenth Night Moon (Izayoi nikki, ca. 1283) as the assertions of a woman truly dedicated to her sons and the legacy of her dead husband. She is frequently paired with the medieval notions of the household and the way or path (michi), highlighting her allegiance to her husband’s lineage and their vocation of poetic production. In the Edo, Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), and early Shōwa (1926–1989) periods, aspects of Abutsu’s life and works, such as her journey to Kamakura on behalf of her sons, were used to support her status as an exemplary woman (retsujo) worthy of emulation by daughters of the scholarly elite and later all literate women. Her manual on court life was copied and annotated by the Tokugawa scholar Ban Kökei (1733–1806) as a reference for his daughters or female kin and later appears in the Meiji compendia known as the Eastern Women’s Instruc-
Today, Abutsu’s travel diary remains a staple of the high school curriculum. But seven hundred years after she recorded this journey, her descendants, who are now known as the Reizei Household, are those who lay claim to her legacy. They remain the only surviving poetic line of the branches descending from the lineage of Shunzei, Teika, and Tameie. As Steven Carter has traced in *Householders: The Reizei Family in Japanese History,* this aristocratic line originated with the split that developed from Abutsu’s legal altercations with her son-in-law. The lineage is represented today by someone who married into the family, as did his predecessor. Priding itself on upholding the traditions of its ancestors, the Reizei Household is now the main promoter of Abutsu’s deified status within popular media.

**Literary Production and Nun Abutsu**

Each of the following four chapters and epilogue takes up one aspect of Abutsu’s life and literary writings. I use her diaries, letters, scholarship, and poetic instruction and composition alongside historical documents and the works of contemporaries to consider how and why such texts were written and circulated and what they tell us about the literary climate in which thirteenth-century women wrote. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 examines *The Nursemaid’s Letter* (*Menoto no fumi, ca. 1264*), a letter-cum-manual that Abutsu wrote for her daughter on how to survive as a court attendant. This letter delineates Abutsu’s expectations for her daughter, but it also shows what skills she had gained through service to Princess Ankamon-in, who was one of medieval Japan’s largest landholders. The work provides a glimpse into the ways women made themselves marketable to a patron within the competitive occupation of attendant and shows how Abutsu was able to rally her poetic talents to secure a close relationship with Ankamon-in for the remainder of their lives.42

Chapter 3 takes up one of Abutsu’s best-known works, her diary *Fitful Slumbers.* The diary demonstrates Abutsu’s vast knowledge of *The Tale of Genji,* a talent that enables her to position herself as pining heroine in the mode of the *Genji’s* Ukifune. Her portrayal suggests ways in which medieval women were casting themselves as heroines in their autobiographical writings by borrowing from classical tales. The figure of Abutsu in *Fitful Slumbers* is wracked by indecision over whether to become a nun or return to court life, an ongoing theme that reveals how reclusion, tonsure, and
ascetic practice were seen as paths for women of the Kamakura era and how these choices functioned within autobiographical narrative.

Abutsu is remembered as being the second wife of Fujiwara no Tameie, heir to the preeminent poetic lineage of his time. Her husband actively supported her poetic activities and appears to have provided her with the resources to study and teach poetry, skills that served her well once she moved to Kamakura late in life. Upon the death of her husband, Abutsu sued her son-in-law Tameuji for the inheritance of land rights and documents in legal cases lodged first at the court tribunal of Rokuhara and later at the bakufu tribunal in Kamakura. While awaiting the result of her legal case in Kamakura, she developed a client base of students in the new warrior center that would serve her descendants for generations. Both in the capital and in Kamakura, she was renowned as a reciter and interpreter of *The Tale of Genji*. In her own writings, she asserts the importance of women having a working knowledge of the tale and the ability to parse difficult passages.

Chapter 4 considers Abutsu’s activities as a poet and scholar of *The Tale of Genji*, skills that brought her to the attention of Fujiwara no Tameie and enabled her to flourish within his household. Drawing from her knowledge of Tameie’s poetic teachings and the practices of his family, Abutsu produced the first female-authored treatise on poetry, a work that reveals her understanding of composition and her desire to position herself as an authority on Mikohidari poetry. In examining her activities as a poet and scholar, I will consider the position of female poets and scholars in thirteenth-century Japan. Although women have been treated primarily as readers rather than scholars of *The Tale of Genji*, I will argue that Abutsu’s grasp of the *Genji*, her activities as a mentor, and the response to her writings by male commentators prove she should be considered an interpreter of the *Genji* on a par with the male authors of extant treatises. She offers an exception to the notion that the spheres of poetic commentary and scholarship of *The Tale of Genji* were the sole domain of men and provides a glimpse into common oral teaching practices and traditions of transmitting poetry and narrative among women.

Chapter 5 chronicles Abutsu’s journey from the capital to Kamakura and considers why she undertook this arduous and perhaps unnecessary trip to represent her interests in a legal case against her son-in-law. By recording her travel preparations, the sites along her route, and finally her period of residence in Kamakura, Abutsu asserts her moral stance as a widow and mother, her literary claim to the Mikohidari poetic lineage, and her legal rights as a widow nun. The medium of a travel diary enables her to focus on
the sacrifice she makes for her children and the legitimacy of her position as Mikohidari poet and educator to the heirs of this lineage.

The epilogue considers Abutsu’s legacy and how her works have been read and reinterpreted over the past seven and a half centuries. Abutsu’s guide to court life was widely circulated during her own lifetime and later annotated by the scholars of early modern Japan for their daughters. In the seventeenth century, she was hailed as one of the three greatest travel writers by the poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, her works were included in didactic compendia for women as the products of a loyal wife. Centuries later, during World War II, Abutsu’s advice manual and travel diary were cited by educators as representing her iconic role as the perfect embodiment of a chaste woman (teijo) and mother or, as one male scholar wrote, the “crystallization of motherhood” (basei no kesshō).

Since Diary of the Sixteenth Night Moon and Abutsu’s journey are introduced within high school literature and history classes, today she is known primarily as a travel writer, but there are traces of her other activities to be found on tourist routes and within recent museum exhibitions. Her role as a mentor both in the capital and in Kamakura is evidenced by the existence of two graves, one located near today’s Kyoto Station and another near the temple Eishōji in Kamakura (see the epilogue). Abutsu’s descendants, the members of the Reizei Household, have framed her role in their history as a tale of a devoted mother and featured her in several recent exhibitions and essay collections. Yet despite their promotion of Abutsu as the mother of their founder Tamesuke (1263–1328), perhaps her most important role is in representing, through her writings, the ways in which some medieval women continued to write, teach, engage in scholarly debate, and travel.

As a medieval woman, Abutsu represents many of the qualities that would ensure a successful career despite limited opportunities at court: literary and social dexterity, the tenacity to showcase these talents, and a husband who supported her activities. Her poetic and scholarly abilities made her a useful addition to a court salon, and her strategic marriage to the scion of a literary line ensured access to invaluable resources and opportunities for poetic composition. By all accounts, she enjoyed the support of a lavish female court patron and a doting husband. Her image contrasts with the drab, colorless representations of medieval women that are associated with subjugation and a shift toward patriarchal power. Like Hōjō Masako and Hino Tomiko, Abutsu is depicted as an overachiever who singlehandedly carved a place for herself in history. But by piecing together the evi-
dence from her works and those of contemporaries, a more balanced and nuanced picture of her life emerges in which her roles as attendant, wife, mother, teacher, and nun can be seen as representing the spectrum of positions and choices available to medieval aristocratic women. The following chapter will trace her early life at court and the skills needed to flourish as a female attendant as seen through the advice she provided to her daughter in the form of a long letter.