Introduction

Japan’s aristocratic age, the Heian period (794–1185), saw the emergence of the literary court romance, or monogatari. The best known of these works is without a doubt Genji monogatari (The Tale of Genji). A fair amount is known about the Genji and its composition: it was written by a woman known as Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–ca. 1014 or 1025), and we can deduce from surviving parts of her diary that at least a substantial part of the tale was completed by the year 1008. The Genji is a long work (1,120 pages in the standard English edition) that draws its readers into its narrative universe, creating an idealized picture of the Heian imperial court and its inhabitants and achieving what some have called the world’s first psychological novel. Most modern translators have provided notes, chiefly in order to identify poems alluded to in the text that the modern reader, unlike Murasaki Shikibu’s contemporaries, cannot be expected to have committed to memory.

The Ise Stories differs greatly from the Genji. Its authorship is obscure and multiple; its period of composition appears to have spanned decades, if not a century; and it is relatively short. More importantly, its brief, episodic structure hinders character development or even the telling of a continuous story. Instead the work presents a series of anecdotes and exemplary tales, the purposes of which have become obscured by time.

Nonetheless, the Ise and its poetry remain a literarily satisfying and interpretively exciting reading experience. And it is for its poetry that the Ise became one of the three most important texts in the classical Japanese canon, along with the Genji and the first imperially commissioned anthology of Japanese poetry (chokusenshū), the Kokinshū (905). The Ise has been essential reading for every educated Japanese, male or female, for most of Japan’s history.

Authorship, Title, and Texts

The authorship of The Ise Stories is unknown and plural. What is known is that many of the poems contained in the text are by Ariwara no Narihira (825–880). Narihira was the son of Imperial Prince Abo (792–842), a son of
Emperor Heizei (774–824, r. 806–809). In 810, the retired Heizei’s consort, Fujiwara no Kusuko, together with her brother Nakanari, led an unsuccessful coup to attempt to return Heizei to the throne. As a result, Nakanari was executed, Kusuko committed suicide, and Abo was sent into exile. Abo was also reduced to commoner status and granted the surname Ariwara. He was later pardoned.

Narihira, although an imperial grandson, therefore served in the court bureaucracy as a commoner. The Ariwara developed close ties to another family, the Ki, and Narihira is believed to have been married to a daughter of Ki no Aritsune (815–877). Aritsune’s sister, Seishi, was a consort of Emperor Montoku (827–858, r. 850–858) and gave birth to his eldest son, Prince Koretaka (844–897). (See Appendix B for a family tree.) The Ki and Ariwara therefore had reason to hope that they would benefit when Koretaka ascended the throne.

However, the latter half of the tenth century saw the political rise of the Northern Branch of the Fujiwara, under the leadership of Yoshifusa (804–872). Yoshifusa married his daughter Meishi to Montoku, under whom he became the first commoner to hold the office of Daijōdaijin (Chancellor) and wield effective political power. Meishi gave birth to a boy, whom Yoshifusa put on the throne as Emperor Seiwa (850–880, r. 858–876) when still a child. He then appointed himself regent (sesshō), establishing what was to become known as the Fujiwara Regency, through which the Northern Branch kept control of the government for hundreds of years by placing its daughters in the imperial harem and elevating the resulting grandsons to the throne while minors. Thus Seiwa was chosen as emperor over his much older brother, Koretaka, the candidate of the Ki and Ariwara families, who consequently suffered a further decline of power.

In the Heian period, important imperial figures tended to serve as the focus of salons or smaller courts, sponsoring cultural and religious events and projects. Koretaka’s coterie included not only Narihira and Aritsune, but another former imperial prince, Minamoto no Tōru (822–895). All these men were recognized poets and litterateurs. It is in this environment that the original core of the *Ise monogatari* is believed to have been created. While earlier English-language scholars have tended to suggest that this core was some sort of collection of Narihira’s poetry (such a collection was created, posthumously), contemporary scholarship sees the foundations of the *Ise* in somewhat more developed narrative episodes, following Chinese trends, in addition to stories connected to the composition of poems such as those found in Book XVI of the *Man’yōshū*, the first extant anthology of Japanese poetry, completed circa 759.

The only substantive historical record of Narihira appears in the *Nihon sandai jitsuroku* (The Japanese True Record of Three Reigns, 901), the last of the six official histories written in Chinese. There, under the date of his
death, he is described as (in the Japanese reading of the Chinese text) taibō kanrei, hōjū kakawarazu, hobo saigaku naku, yoku waka wo tsukuru. The first two of these expressions can be translated as “In features, elegant and handsome; in behavior, willful.” Earlier scholars understood hobo saigaku naku to mean that he was deficient in the Chinese learning required for career advancement, and this tied in well with a view of the Ise as largely untouched by Chinese literary influence. Present-day scholars, however, interpret the line as “not the conscientious type” and are much more willing to credit Narihira with knowledge of continental literature. Yoku waka wo tsukuru means “he composed Japanese poetry well,” at a time when the composition of Japanese, rather than Chinese, verse was still very much associated with women and the writing of love letters.

It is widely accepted that the Ise came into existence over a considerable period of time and with the help of many hands. The three-stage theory developed by Katagiri Yōichi has found general approval: the genesis of the Ise is to be found in a relatively small collection of stories and poems written by Ariwara no Narihira, necessarily before his death in 880. Poems from this now-lost Ur-text were also included in the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, the Kokinshū, commissioned in 905. This explains some of the similarities between the Ise and the Kokinshū.

The oldest section of the Ise includes the hero’s secret meeting with the Ise Priestess. There is no historical evidence for this event, and modern scholars believe it to be a fiction fabricated by Narihira; nonetheless, the episode is also included in the Kokinshū as historical fact. Today it is generally accepted that the very title Ise monogatari comes from this story of an imperial envoy and an Ise Priestess, which now forms Episode 69 of the standard version of the Ise. Accordingly, while the title of this work is similar to many other literary court romances of the Heian and Kamakura periods (Yamato monogatari, Kara monogatari, Genji monogatari, Sagoromo monogatari), Ise monogatari does not mean “Tales of Ise,” but rather, “a collection of tales, including that one about the Ise Priestess.” It is for this reason that we gave our translation the title The Ise Stories, rather than the better-known, but inaccurate, The Tales of Ise.

Sometime around the mid-tenth century the text was significantly expanded, and the names of historical figures known to have been associated with Narihira and Koretaka’s salon were added to it. It is presumably at this stage that poems by Narihira previously included in the Kokinshū were spun into the tale of his abduction of Fujiwara no Takaiko (also read “Takako,” 842–910, known as the Nijō Empress), Yoshifusa’s niece, consort to Emperor Seiwa, and the mother of Emperor Yōzei (868–949, r. 876–884). Imanishi Yūichirō has recently suggested that such lese majesty was possible because of the dynastic break between the Montoku–Seiwa–Yōzei imperial line and that of Kōkō (830–887, r. 884–887) and Uda (867–931,
This is also the stage of the text at which the focus on “courtliness” (miyabi) was introduced. This celebration of courtly elegance is one of nostalgia for a time before the rise of the Northern Branch. It is believed that such additions were made by members of the Ki clan; some even suggest Tsurayuki, one of the editors of the Kokinshū, or his son Tokifumi. Others involved may have included Narihira’s son, Shigeharu, or even Lady Ise (Ise no Go), a contemporary of Tsurayuki whom most pre-modern commentators believed to have been Narihira’s wife late in life and the final redactor of the Ise. If this were so, the title Ise monogatari might mean [Lady] Ise’s Tales. However, Lady Ise’s and Narihira’s respective dates make this marriage impossible. Obviously, the association of the Ise with the Ki clan or with Emperor Uda, whose authority was finally usurped by the Fujiwara Regency, allows for a political reading of the Ise as resistance to Fujiwara no Yoshifusa and his descendants. According to this reading, Narihira’s abduction of Takaiko was an effort to disrupt Yoshifusa’s plan to give her to the future Emperor Seiwa. These political readings seem to have been first developed in the late Edo period by such scholars as Motoori Uchitō (1792–1855) and Kanō Morohira (1796–1847).

It is at this second stage of the Ise’s development that the figure of Narihira as an old man (okina) also appears. The role seems to have a generally celebratory function, and Katagiri interprets the okina as the implied narrator of the Ise as a whole. The introduction of an aged Narihira also gives a sense of biographical closure to the text.

Finally, a last group of episodes was added at about the time when the third imperial anthology, the Shūishū (ca. 1005–1011), was compiled. The episodes typically resemble ones already contained in the text, in a kind of theme-and-variation development. In them, the character of the protagonist becomes almost a caricature, one clearly based on a pre-existing image of the “amorous” (iro-gonomi) Narihira. The episodes in the latter part of the Ise also take on a decidedly elegiac quality. Many refer to the passage of youth, love, and time in general, and the final episode is commonly understood to be Narihira’s deathbed poem.

Several episodes of the Ise also appear in somewhat different form in Yamato monogatari (Tales of Yamato), a work believed to have been writ-
ten between 950 and 970, but centered around the court of Emperor Uda. In the *Yamato*, characters such as Narihira and Takaiko are identified by name. In *Sagoromo monogatari* (The Tale of Sagoromo, latter half of the eleventh century), the *Ise* is referred to as *Zaigo Chūjō no nikki* (The Diary of the Ariwara Middle Captain of the Fifth Rank), indicating that the text was now regarded as a historically accurate “diary” (*nikki*) rather than as a fictional “romance” (*monogatari*). This is confirmed in the vernacular history *Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror, ca. 1090), which relates Narihira and Takaiko’s affair as fact. It is this status as history that allowed the *Ise* to be drawn on time and time again for the imperial anthologies: while poems “composed” by fictional characters, such as those in the *Genji*, were excluded, poems by the “historical” personages who appeared in the *Ise* were eligible.

The *Ise* reached its final state under Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241). Teika collated and copied the text a great number of times during his lifetime. Three of his copies were the most influential for later readers: the *Rufu-bon*, the *Takeda-bon*, and the *Tenpuku-bon*, which all differ in small but substantive ways. The *Rufu-bon* (literally, “the widely circulated text”), as its name suggests, was the text that appeared in woodblock-printed editions in the Edo period (1603–1868) and became the most broadly diffused. In the Muromachi period (1333–1573) the *Takeda-bon*, named after its one-time owner, the Takeda warrior house of Wakasa province, was more influential. Today, the preferred text is the *Tenpuku-bon*, dated Tenpuku 2 (1234), the year Teika completed it. Interestingly, Teika’s colophon states that he made the copy for his granddaughter, making it clear that the *Ise* was considered important reading material for aristocratic women. The manuscript was owned at one point by the Sanjōnishi family, which copied it. The original is now lost, but the best copy is presently owned by Gakushūin University. It is attributed by some to Sanjōnishi Sanetaka (1455–1537), a major courtier, poet, and scholar of the late Muromachi period. This manuscript is the one that has served as the basis for all modern editions, although in recent years another copy, made by Reizei Tamekazu (1486–1549), has gained preference. No annotated edition based on the *Tamekazu-bon* has yet appeared.

While Teika’s version of the *Ise* became definitive, a number of “old texts” (*kohon*) continued to circulate, the most important being the *Nurigome-bon*, which includes more than 125 episodes and is believed to have been produced by Teika’s poetic rivals, the Rokujō house.

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7. A transcription can be found in Katagiri, (*Ihon taishō*) *Ise monogatari*. 
The Commentary Tradition

Today scholars divide commentaries on the *Ise* into three groups. The first, called “before the ‘old commentaries’” (*kyūchū izen*), can be traced back to the mid-thirteenth century and are represented by the *Waka chiken shū* and the *Reizei-ke Ise monogatari shō*, as well as a number of texts attributed to Fujiwara no Tameaki (ca. 1230s–after 1295), a grandson of Fujiwara no Teika. Tameaki seems to have established a set of complicated tantric practices and exegetical techniques associated with the *Ise* in Kamakura, far from the cultural center of Kyoto. While Susan Klein dates the *Waka chiken shū* to 1265 and the *Reizei-ke Ise monogatari shō* to the early fourteenth century, the *Waka chiken shū* often rejects interpretations found in the Reizei school text, suggesting that the latter represents at least in part earlier interpretations.

According to Klein the *Waka chiken shū* exists in two lineages: the earlier Ietaka line and the Sanjōnishi, or Shoryōbu line. The latter was the more widely disseminated, and it shared mutual influence with texts written by Fujiwara no Tameaki and his disciples. These texts interpret the *Ise* through the left-handed tantric practices of the Shingon Tachikawa sect. An example is the *Gyokuden jinpi no maki*, which interprets the beginning of the first episode as follows:

[In the opening line] the phrase “mukashi otoko” (the Man of Old) means “wagami” (my body). It is an indication that [Narihira is] Sumiyoshi’s avatar. Sumiyoshi’s Original Ground (*honji*) is Kannon. Because Kannon is the eternal Buddha who has no beginning or end, Narihira is referred to as “mukashi” (old or ancient). “Otoko” (man) refers to the Diamond Realm of Dainichi [Nyorai], which is understood as male. The women are Aritsune’s daughters, [who represent the female] deity of the Womb-Storehouse Realm. The line “he went to the capital at Nara” means “for the purpose of aiding and transforming all living beings by bestowing an expedient device for their benefit, he took on ordinary human form and came into this corrupt world, forming a karmic link to humanity.” . . . In this way, the essential purpose of this tale is to help us grasp the profound meaning of Shingon.8

While the Ietaka *Waka chiken shū* does not closely follow Tameaki’s exegesis, it insists that Narihira was a manifestation of Kannon and that he brought enlightenment through sexual intercourse to 3,733 women. The *Ise*
is read as the record of his activities, focusing on the twelve women he felt best understood his ministry, including Ki no Aritsune’s Daughter, Lady Ise, Empress Taikaiko, and Ono no Komachi.9

In the Muromachi period, the first of the second major group of commentaries—the so-called “old commentaries” (kyūchūshaku)—is the Guken shō of Ichijō Kanera (also read Kaneyoshi) (1402–1481), completed in 1474. Kanera heavily criticizes the Kamakura-period Waka chiken shū and Reizei school interpretations, opting for a secular reading that eschews the allegorical techniques of the previous age. Nonetheless, he still reads the Ise as an account of Narihira.

Kanera was followed by a lineage that originated with the famous “linked-verse” (renga) master Sōgi (1421–1502). Sōgi’s interpretations were passed on through private lectures and lecture notes, the most important of which are the Shōmon shō, written by his disciple Botanka Shōhaku (1443–1527); the Isei shō, notes by Funabashi (Kiyohara) Nobukata from lectures delivered by Sanetaka; and the Ketsugi shō by Hosokawa Yūsai, based on lectures by Sanjōnishin Saneki (1511–1579) but also including selections from earlier commentaries, as well as his own opinions.

Yūsai’s Ketsugi shō, published for the first time in 1597 and widely circulated throughout the Edo period, represented the Ise reading most commonly accepted during the early modern period—one often quite different from that constructed by modern philologists. This difference is obvious in the very first episode. Unlike modern scholars, Yūsai insisted that the man of every episode is none other than Narihira, although, following Sōgi, the sisters have now become anonymous and are no longer identified, as they were in the Kamakura-period secret tradition, as the daughters of Ki no Aritsune. Most importantly, Yūsai, like all previous commentators, took the second poem to be the sisters’ reply, while today it is understood to be an editorial aside by the narrator (see translation, below).

The other influential commentary before the rise of the nativist “national learning” (kokugaku) movement was the Shūsui shō of Kitamura Kigin (1624–1705), first published in 1680. Using both interlinear notes and separate commentary sections to facilitate reading, Kigin gave selected quotations from Kanera, Shōhaku, the Isei shō, and the Ketsugi shō. He also included the interpretations of his teacher, Matsunaga Teitoku (1571–1653, a famous Edo-period renga master and one of the first to lecture on the Ise in public), as well as his own views.

9. Bowring, “A Cultural History,” pp. 436–437. Ono no Komachi was a poet in the courts of emperors Ninmyō (810–850, r. 833–850) and Montoku, and is counted as one of the Six Poetic Immortals (the only female among them) in the Kana Preface of the Kokinshū.
Finally, the third group of commentaries—the “new commentaries” (shinchūshaku)—are understood to have begun with the Seigo okudan of Keichū (1640–1701), completed in 1692. Keichū is viewed as the forerunner of the kokugaku movement, which brought a philological methodology to the examination of classical texts. Interpretations were no longer accepted simply because they had been received from a teacher. Instead, relevant texts were cited as evidence, and arguments were developed in a somewhat more logical manner.

For example, Yūsai had trouble with a sentence in the first episode: kono wotoko kaimamitekeri, “He spied on them through a crack.” He explained it as follows: “Kaimami is to peep through the space in a fence. But here, [since] peeping is not elegant (yūgen), the expression must mean ‘to see from a distance, or through something.’” In other words, Yūsai knew that the word kaimami means “peeping,” but since peeping is neither romantic nor elegant, while Narihira is by definition both, the word must mean something else in this context. In contrast, Keichū cited occurrences of the word from the Nibongi (720), the Taketori monogatari (ninth century), and the Yamato monogatari to demonstrate that it always means to peep through a gap or hole. Keichū was also the first to establish, through philological analysis, that the second poem is not a reply from the sisters, but instead an editorial comment by the narrator.

Keichū’s work was followed by the Ise monogatari dōjimon of the fiercely partisan Kada no Azumamaro (1668–1736), one of the founders of the kokugaku school. In question-and-answer format, Azumamaro took every opportunity to contest and belittle Yūsai’s work. Perhaps the most curious aspect of his approach is his belief that the mana-bon versions of the Ise—Kamakura-period texts that transcribe the original Japanese into solely Chinese characters—were the work’s original form. However, this position is merely an extreme version of a tendency, found throughout the Ise commentaries and evident in Keichū as well, to explain unclear words written phonetically by writing them with Chinese characters, which, unlike the kana syllabary, carry semantic weight. It is as though these Chinese characters were indeed the “true names” (the literal meaning of “mana”) of the indigenous Japanese words written in kana (lit., “temporary names”). So, for example, Kanera explains the indigenous Japanese word namameku (“very pretty” in our translation), which appears in Episode 1, by saying that it is written with the Chinese graphs 取媚 (saibi; lit., “extreme” and “flirt”), and Keichū quotes the Tang-dynasty Chinese romance Yu xian ku (J., Yūsen-kutsu; The Dwelling of the Playful Goddesses), where the characters 婉娜 (lit., “flirtatious” and “graceful”) are given the Japanese gloss namameku.

While Keichū saw the Ise as a mixture of fact and fiction, in which the facts refer to the historical Narihira, Azumamaro insisted that the Ise is completely fictional:
The monogatari is written about “the man of old” from his capping ceremony to his death. One should not conclude that this “man of old” is Narihira. Evidence that it is not Narihira will appear everywhere throughout the tale. If the man in the tale were always Narihira in every case, then each time it says “a woman of old,” how could we decide who it is? Beginning with the words “in the past” means that a specific year and month are not indicated. This is because a fictional monogatari is not a historical record.\footnote{Newhard, “Genre, Secrecy and the Book,” p. 242, modified.}

Finally, as Jamie Newhard has demonstrated, Azumamaro was actually morally opposed to the Ise as a whole, seeing it as lascivious and salacious. His “commentary” was in fact an extended polemic against the court poetic tradition of the Nijō school.

The last two premodern commentaries frequently referred to in modern studies of the Ise are the Ise monogatari kōi by Azumamaro’s student, the renowned Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769), and the Shinshaku of Fujii Takanao (1764–1840), both kokugaku scholars. As Richard Bowring has written, the Kōi was the first work to resemble modern commentaries: it provided modern paraphrases of difficult passages and attempted to have each section make sense to the reader by providing one definitive meaning.\footnote{Bowring, “A Cultural History,” p. 474.} Nonetheless, Mabuchi valued the Ise, like the Man’yōshū, less as literature than as material with which to reconstruct the ideal kodō, or “Ancient Way,” of Japan, a pristine native existence stripped of “foreign” influences such as Buddhism and Confucianism.

Newhard credits Takanao with being the first to demonstrate a truly literary approach to the Ise, “devoted to discussing how the language works to further the narrative . . . and to call attention to the expressive techniques it employs.”\footnote{Newhard, “Genre, Secrecy and the Book,” p. 290.} Regarding the first episode, for example, Takanao had this to say about the phrase “sisters lived” (harakara sumu) in the sentence “in the village lived two very pretty sisters”:

Saying “sisters lived” indicates without saying it that there are no parents, and is skillful. The passage is written [to suggest] how these sisters, living in the desolation of the old capital without parents, are very pitiful, and how one who sees them must take their plight to heart. Seeing such women, the feelings of one who knows mono no...
aware are in confusion. Why is it that Keichū and [Mabuchi] were unable to see this? 13

Modern Commentaries and Translations

Ise monogatari presented a problem to scholars at the beginning of Japan’s modern era. Its historical significance in the development of what was now seen as a national, Japanese-language-based, literature was undeniable, but its apparent celebration of illicit affairs and imperial cuckolding ran contrary to the Victorian-inflected morality of the Meiji period (1868–1912). In the first modern edition of the Ise, not published until 1890, Narihira was declared a patriot for his support of Prince Koretaka (and primogeniture) against the Fujiwara “usurpers of imperial authority.” Two of the most complete studies of the Ise published before the Pacific War were by Kamata Masanori (1919) and Arai Munirō (1931). The latter, in particular, valorized the Ise for representing the oldest stratum of Japanese literature, supposedly free of any foreign (that is, Chinese) influence. 14

The Ise was seldom translated into vernacular Japanese during the early modern era; the main example is the Ise monogatari hira-kotoba (The Ise Stories in Plain Words, 1678). The next vernacular translation did not appear until 1917. 15 The first English translation, by Frits Vos (1957), is an enormously scholarly work, but it has little appeal for general readers. In 1968, Helen McCullough published what has since become the standard English translation, Tales of Ise: Lyrical Episodes from Tenth-century Japan. As the title indicates, the approach of this translation was largely formalist, as the study of Japanese classical poetry was at the time dominated by New Criticism as practiced by Robert Brower, Earl Miner, and Konishi Jin’ichi. Such an approach emphasized philologically definitive interpretations for all episodes, focused on the aesthetic and lyrical, and valued the discovery of such tropes as irony and self-referentiality. Ironically indeed, the following year saw a revolution in Ise studies with the publication of Katagiri Yōichi’s Ise monogatari no kenkyū (Research on Ise monogatari), one of the first works of modern scholarship to begin to explore the Ise’s involved commentary history. Katagiri was preceded in print by Itō Masayoshi, who in 1965 wrote an article exploring the influence of the esoteric commentaries on Zeami’s Noh plays. These scholars were soon joined by Watanabe

13. Ibid., p. 291.
15. For more on Japanese translations of the Ise, see Mostow, “Modern Rendition,” pp. 76–97.
Minoru, whose strongly political reading of the *Ise* influenced the work of Michele (Michael) Marra (1991). Marra was followed the next year by a landmark article by Richard Bowring, which presented in English for the first time a concise history of the exegetical tradition surrounding the *Ise*. This work in turn inspired scholars such as Susan Klein to delve more deeply into the esoteric hermeneutics of the medieval era.16

**Translation, Commentaries, and Illustrations**

*Mukashi wotoko arikeri*: these words, or variants of them, typically start so many episodes of *Ise monogatari* that for centuries they have stood for the whole work. *Mukashi* means “long ago,” “in the old days,” “of old,” and so on. *Wotoko* (pronounced “*otoko*” in modern Japanese) means “a/the man,” and *arikeri* “there was.” The “man” is of course Ariwara no Narihira. For this reason Narihira has long been known, in connection with the *Ise*, as *mukashi wotoko*. This nongrammatical expression (*mukashi* is an adverb, not an adjective) appears in English writing on aspects of *Ise* reception as “the Man of Old.”

“Back then, there was this man” is the way we translate *mukashi wotoko arikeri* in *The Ise Stories*. We did not choose it lightly. It sums up our approach to the translation.

We wanted the translation to have a fresh, appealing, and somewhat spoken character. “Back then,” an expression as plain as the word *mukashi*, is certainly spoken language, but it is neither especially contemporary nor excessively casual. “*This* man,” too, is a device often heard in storytelling. It effectively announces the chief figure in the story. The *Ise* authors, who cannot have foreseen the *mukashi otoko* of later centuries, wrote soberly and concisely. We tried to do so, too, and in this spirit we also allowed ourselves contractions (didn’t, wasn’t). At times these effectively set off the heightened mood of the poems. Our ambition was that each episode should give off at least a glint of feeling, grace, or wit. Wit in one mood or another pervades the work and is probably one key to its enduring importance.

We also aimed at accuracy, as most translators undoubtedly do. However, the commentaries that follow the episodes demonstrate how elusive accuracy is in this case. Centuries of effort devoted to elucidating the text have often led instead to confusion and dissension. Who are the characters involved? What are they doing, and where? What are they saying? What is

16. The 1972 translation by H. Jay Harris marked no advance from the McCullough translation and included none of the new research, such as Katagiri’s. Scholars have largely ignored it.
the reader to gather from the episode? Is the tone one of reproach, regret, praise, resignation, or desire? What does this or that poem actually mean or imply? We therefore had sometimes to make our own decisions about where accuracy, or at least the best guess, lay.

In pursuit of accuracy in the translation we considered above all the readings reached by Takeoka Masao (1987), Fukui Teisuke (1994), and Akiyama Ken (1997); while our commentaries give particular prominence to the views of Katagiri Yōichī (in several publications) and Takeoka. Katagiri has long reigned as the dean of Ise studies. Takeoka, born in 1919, spent most of his career as secondary school teacher, earning his doctorate only in 1967 and moving to university teaching two years later. Influenced by the folkloric approach of Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), he takes at times a rather literal approach to the text. However, his complete philological analysis of the Ise, which followed a massive commentary on the contemporaneous Kokinshū, remains the only one published since 1939. It also quotes extensively from the analyses of all modern scholars and includes most of the major premodern commentaries.

To translate the poems, we chose to preserve the original 5–7–5–7–7 syllable count, distributed over five separate lines. Most of the poems rely for their effect on linguistic and rhetorical devices that do not pass readily into another language, but we did our best to give each one character and presence. In short, we tried to make this translation of the Ise both informative and genuinely absorbing.

In the commentaries we have made the historically dominant, “traditional” interpretation of the episode available to the reader together with the currently accepted scholarly interpretation(s), when the two differed. The traditional reading understood the Ise to be an autobiography written by Narihira and later edited by Lady Ise. It had a major impact on Japanese cultural history, not only in poetry, but in drama and the visual arts as well.

To give some sense of the Ise’s visual reception, we have included the illustrations from the Saga-bon, originally published in 1608. The Saga-bon imagery became the standard iconography for the Ise in the early modern period. It also provided the norm against which other artists worked, for example in the ukiyo-e or Rinpa styles.

17. A concise explanation of the basics of classical Japanese poetry can be found in Mostow, Pictures of the Heart.