This is a study of bonds of friendship depicted between noblemen in the literature of the Japanese imperial court during the Heian period (794–1185). It is not a description of real-life friendships between historical persons but rather an attempt to describe how what I will be calling “courtly male friendship” is depicted in a number of texts circulating in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. The recurring patterns of this literary depiction constitute the “poetics” in the book’s title. The texts under discussion are generically diverse and include a poetry collection (the Wakan rōei shū, or Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing); two poem-tales (the Ise monogatari, or Tale of Ise; and the Heichū monogatari, or Tale of Heichū); a poetic memoir (the Kagerō nikki, or Kagerō Diary); and an extended work of imaginative fiction (the Genji monogatari, or Tale of Genji). Apart from Poems to Sing, all of the texts combine poetry and prose to varying degrees. My approach to the poetic element in the texts has been to focus on identifying motifs and rhetorical structures that recur in Chinese and Japanese poems about male friendship. In addressing the prose stories, I have focused on describing pairs of male characters created by the authors in their narratives of friendship. As we shall see, the nobleman’s desires for erotic adventure with women and for friendship with men are not contradictory or mutually exclusive in these texts but are integrated and play off each other in interesting ways. In fact, to be both a lover of women and a friend of men comes to define the very notion of what constitutes a hero in the period. Such a hero seems to have provided Heian courtiers with hope for transcending the constrictions and disappointments of their admittedly privileged lives. In particular, this study is concerned with clarifying how Heian literature articulates the nobleman’s wish to be known and appreciated fully by another man—or what may be termed the hope of transcendence through male friendship.
The ranked aristocracy of the mid-Heian court is estimated to have numbered no more than five thousand people whose ostensible purpose for existence was their service to the imperial household. This small group completely dominated cultured life in the capital, called Heian kyō, the “City of Peace and Tranquility,” from which derives the period name. Although courtly literature has come to symbolize Heian culture as a whole, the noblemen and noblewomen who produced it were but a tiny fraction of the population, a leisured elite. The court aristocracy rarely had to concern itself with earning a living, with child rearing, or with domestic chores. This is not to say that courtiers had easy lives, however. Political disgrace, rumor of personal misconduct, decline in family prestige, and even exile lay in wait for them; indeed, courtly literature was a forum where the collective fears inspired by the instability of their hierarchical world of finely tuned ranks could be explored, and it was also an island of elegance and well-being that they created to shelter themselves against those fears.

Any man born into one of the aristocratic families that served at court was among the most privileged on earth. He could expect to receive an elite continental-style education in Chinese poetry and the Chinese classics that would subsequently lead to his steady advancement in the elaborate court hierarchy. According to his abilities and the quality of his alliances, he might attain service to the imperial household or, even more desirable, become adviser to the emperor himself. But the competition for power and influence among the leading clans was fierce. By the time of the mid-Heian period one branch of the Fujiwara family—the hokke, or Northern House—had achieved overwhelming political dominance at court. This was accomplished through a system of marriage politics whereby the reigning Fujiwara chieftain of the Northern House was able to control the throne as regent (sesshō) by naming a daughter consort to the emperor and later installing his own grandson on the throne.

The almost complete domination of the court by the Northern House through the regency system (sekkan sei) meant that much of the court aristocracy was effectively disenfranchised. Members of the less successful branches of the Fujiwara and other clans were routinely sent out to the provinces for lengthy terms as provincial governors. Such a posting was prestigious enough, but it obligated the courtier to be absent from the capital for years at a time, and for that reason provincial governorships were generally not welcomed by high-ranking courtiers harboring political ambitions. Interestingly, it is from the class of provincial governors, on the periphery of court power, that many of the greatest Heian writers emerged, a result perhaps of the tendency for people on the margins to develop a critical per-
spective and analytical consciousness toward centers of power. Thus, while a nobleman’s aristocratic birth provided little solace in the face of his lack of political clout, at least his literary attainments in the Chinese classics and Japanese poetry (or “Yamato song,” waka) could provide the basis for his participation in a cultural and aesthetic regime of power that emerged in relation to the political power of the Fujiwara Regency. Verses and narratives depicting a disenfranchised hero who vied for the love of women and the friendship of men show that literature provided the Heian court with a cultural arena of the imagination, where power lost in the public realm might be recouped through the art of writing and reading.

Western scholars have heretofore tended to introduce questions of power and politics into their readings of Heian texts from the angle of feminism, placing special emphasis on the imbalance of power between men and women in the context of courtship. The strategy has been to describe the ways in which Heian literature idealizes romantic love, or “longing,” and then show it to be embedded within the marriage politics of the regency system. In general, feminist analysis has stressed the suffering of noblewomen and has looked for ways in which the literature nonetheless gives women hope of rising above or getting beyond the constraints of marriage politics through their experience of love or through some other means. The present study inherits these concerns about the transcendence of love and the suffering of noblewomen and has looked for ways in which the literature nonetheless gives women hope of rising above or getting beyond the constraints of marriage politics through their experience of love or through some other means. The present study inherits these concerns about the transcendence of love and the suffering of noblewomen and has looked for ways in which the literature nonetheless gives women hope of rising above or getting beyond the constraints of marriage politics through their experience of love or through some other means. The present study inherits these concerns about the transcendence of love and the suffering of noblewomen and has looked for ways in which the literature nonetheless gives women hope of rising above or getting beyond the constraints of marriage politics through their experience of love or through some other means.

Several of the narratives addressed in this study—namely, the Tale of Heichū, the Kagerō Diary, and the Tale of Genji—depict female characters playing a central role as mediators in friendships between noblemen. The central role of female characters can best be explained in terms of the ways that gendered perspectives inform Heian writing. In some scenes an author’s depiction of male friendship is an expression of male interiority and highlights friendship as part of a man’s inner life, whereas in other scenes such a depiction is an expression of female observation of men and frequently highlights the role of women in enabling the friendship. Heian depictions of male friendship inevitably embody the differing perspectives of male and female authors whose viewpoints on the subject were profoundly shaped by their gender roles in the court aristocracy.
The Chinese paradigm for male friendship is the story of Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi, otherwise known as the legend of the Broken Strings (Chinese: jue xian; Japanese: zetsugen). It appears for the first time in Han dynasty texts and was familiar to the Heian court as a theme of Tang dynasty painting and from the text of the Lie-zi. According to the legend, Bo Ya was a skilled player of the zither, and Zhong Ziqi was his friend. Alone among all his listeners, Ziqi possessed a remarkable ability to appreciate the nuances of Bo Ya’s playing. When Bo Ya played a passage that evoked mountains, Ziqi would grasp his intent immediately and say, “lofty like Mt. Tai”; when his playing evoked the sound of rushing water, Ziqi would say, “flowing like the Yangzi River and the Yellow River.” When Ziqi died, Bo Ya cut the strings of his zither and never played again, “because there was no one else in the world that ‘knew his sounds.’” The legend of the Broken Strings came to exemplify the ideal of a nobleman’s profound response to another man. Its echoes can be heard throughout Heian literature in stories that depict the nobleman’s desire to be known and appreciated by a kindred spirit.

As the legend of the Broken Strings suggests, the Heian literature of courtly male friendship grew out of a bilingual and bicultural context involving aspects of both Chinese and Japanese literary languages. For members of the early Japanese (Yamato) elite, the ability to read and write was entirely a product of contact with continental culture, and originally Chinese literacy was the only type of literacy that existed for them. The reception of continental culture in the sixth century by the emerging Yamato state was controversial and followed an uncertain trajectory, characterized by military coups, political assassinations, and heated clashes among elite clans, but the forces favoring accommodation with Chinese cultural forces, and in particular with Buddhist teaching, ultimately prevailed. By the seventh century, powerful families within the Yamato court enjoyed the social and political advantages that Chinese literacy afforded them. At the same time, a desire to express themselves in the indigenous language led to creative experiments in literary production of Yamato texts, starting with renditions of Japanese poems called “Yamato songs” (waka). Initially, these experiments were conducted by literarily gifted members of the Yamato court and involved inventing ways to alternately use Chinese graphs for their sound (as phonetic graphs) and for their meaning (as logographs) so that an approximation of the indigenous language could be produced as text. Later, the phonetic use of Chinese graphs was systematized into a syllabic script (kana) that allowed relatively facile transcription of Yamato language as text. Phonetic graphs were at first used exclusively to transcribe names and waka within the context of Chinese prose, but with the later emergence
of syllabic script it became possible to create extended narratives in the Yamato language.

The newfound ability of the educated elite at the Yamato court to write poems and prose in the indigenous language never displaced the court’s interest in Chinese texts, however, and Chinese writing maintained tremendous prestige as an object of literary study and enjoyment. As Marion Ury once noted, “to the Heian Japanese, Chinese culture and its products existed apart from national boundaries as requisite tools of civilization and, to a very high degree, as the marks of civilization itself.”7 Furthermore, written Chinese continued to be used for all official communications within the Yamato court and between the Yamato court and the outside world, namely the Tang empire and the Korean kingdoms of Silla and Paekche. The Heian courtier’s treatment of Chinese texts underwent a gradual change, however, whereby classical Chinese came to be read following Yamato-like diction and syntax. By the tenth century, Chinese texts were no longer something separate and foreign but were fully integrated into a system of literacy involving Japanese and Chinese frames of reference, what Thomas LaMarre has termed “the Yamato-Han or ‘wa-kan’ assemblage.”8 This assemblage allowed courtiers to integrate multiple forms of literary expression into a coherent, if slightly precarious, Yamato-Han literary culture. Although plagued by occasional glitches and inaccuracies, the hybrid literary apparatus nevertheless allowed most noblemen and a few elite noblewomen to read and compose texts at a sophisticated level within a dual literary environment.9

Because the literary depictions of male friendship addressed in this study are a product of a culture’s history, they are inevitably bound to a specific time and place. We cannot assume that friendship’s manifestation in Heian literature should automatically be intelligible to people living in the present day, one thousand years removed, for its epistemological underpinnings are not necessarily our own. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to completely deny the comprehensibility of these narratives of friendship to people of today, for they manage to speak to us movingly about the Heian nobleman’s desire to be known and appreciated by a kindred spirit. It is a desire that resonates convincingly across the temporal and cultural divide between the texts’ creators and ourselves. The historical contexts that produce the wish for friendship and the depiction of that wish in literature will inevitably differ across cultures and time, yet it seems only human to wish for the intimacy of a friend, however elusive, who might understand us.