Ise monogatari was universally recognized throughout Japan’s premodern period as one of the three most important literary works in the Japanese language, along with The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari, ca. 1008) and the first imperially-commissioned anthology of Japanese poetry (waka), the Kokin waka shū (Collection of Japanese Poems Past and Present, ca. 905; Kokinshū for short). This book concerns the reception and appropriation of the Ise monogatari (The Ise Stories, also known as The Tales of Ise) from the twelfth century to the early seventeenth, especially as evidenced by pictorializations of the text, such as illustrations. That is, I will be investigating various audiences—aristocrats, warriors, and town-dwellers, men and women alike—as they engaged with the Ise monogatari in both its textual and visual forms.

As Robert Darnton has complained, how people in the past read is one of the most elusive subjects for a historian. Few people anywhere in the world, at any time, have kept diaries on what they have read and what they thought of it. In the case of the Ise, our chief evidence comes from three sources: commentaries on the Ise itself, pictorializations of episodes or poems from the Ise (illustrations, fan-paintings, screens, etc.), and “original” works—visual and verbal—that allude to the Ise and/or use it as a subtext.

The earliest extant written commentary on the Ise is the Waka chiken shū (Collection of Revealed Knowledge about Japanese Poetry, ca. 1260s). However, this text often presents its views as contradictions of other interpretations, indicative of an earlier tradition. The Waka chiken shū, together with the Reizei-ke Ise monogatari shō (The Reizei Family Ise Stories Commentary) and various texts attributed to Fujiwara no Tameaki (ca. 1230s–after 1295), a grandson of the great poet Teika, form what has been called the “early medieval esoteric commentaries.” These works identify unnamed characters in the Ise, assign dates to the events in it, and base their interpretation on allegorical readings that elevate Ariwara no Narihira (825–880)—the putative protagonist of the Ise—to the status of a bodhisattva, bringing enlightenment to seemingly countless women through sexual intercourse. Some of these commentaries appear connected to tantric rituals initiated by Tameaki.
In contrast to these allegorical interpretations, what can be called “traditional commentaries” start with the *Gukenshō (Selected Humble Views)* of Ichijō Kanera (also read Kaneyoshi, 1402–1481), the revised version of which was completed in 1474. Kanera strongly rejects the allegorical approach, and largely confines himself to explaining the meanings of unclear words and court customs and identifying poems also contained in the *chokusenshū* (imperial poetry anthologies). Kanera transmitted his teachings on the *Ise* to the *renga* (linked verse) master Sōgi (1421–1502), who in turn transmitted the knowledge through lectures to a number of disciples, some of whom, most notably Shōhaku (from 1477–1491) and Hosokawa Yūsai (in 1596), wrote commentaries of their own, incorporating the teachings of their masters. This line of scholarship continues into the early modern period in such works as the *Shūsuishō (The Gathered Sheaves Commentary)* of Kitamura Kigin (1624–1705). Modern, philologically-based scholarship on the *Ise* can be traced back to Keichū (1640–1701) and his *Seigo okudan (Conjectures about The Ise Stories*, before 1693).

Illustrations to the *Ise* are attested to as early as the twelfth century. Today, however, the oldest *Ise monogatari-e*, or “*Ise*-pictures,” are three works all in the *emaki* (illustrated scroll) format, but greatly differing in style and condition. The apparently oldest example is a group of extant fragments from the original scrolls, drawn simply in ink on paper. The second oldest work is now one scroll, but again composed of fragments of the original product. This work is richly colored, with gold and silver grains applied to the paper’s surface. Its compositional perspective, as well, is at a much more acute angle than the first work. Finally, the third example exists only in a nineteenth-century copy. Its style uses the *iji dōzu* (literally, “different time, same picture”) technique, where the same figure appears more than once in the same pictorial composition, something usually associated with *shaji engi emaki*, or illustrated narratives concerning the origins and miracles of temples and shrines.

All three of these works are dated by the majority of Japanese art historians and literary scholars to the thirteenth century (in the case of the third example, its original composition is dated to the thirteenth century). On the face of it, this common date and three widely divergent approaches to pictorialization of the *Ise* present a remarkable opportunity for a case study of the reception history of the *Ise monogatari* in particular, and literary court culture in general. We might contrast this situation to that of illustrations to *The Tale of Genji*: leading *Genji*-e scholar Akiyama Terukazu is of the opinion that there was an established iconography for the *Genji* as early as the eleventh century. The earliest textual evidence for illustrations to the *Genji* is found in the diary of the courtier Minamoto no Morotoki, where we find a reference to a set of illustrations sponsored by Retired Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129, r. 1072–1086) and his daughter-in-law, the empress Fujiwara no Shōshi (1101–1145), in an entry dated to 1119. The earliest extant fragments of such a work are *The Tale of Genji Illustrated Scrolls (Genji monogatari emaki)*, divided between the Gotoh Museum and the Tokugawa Reimeikai Foundation and usually dated to between 1120 and 1180. Some suggest that the fragments are from the very project recorded by Morotoki.

The early degree of codification of *Genji* iconography is suggested by a thirteenth-century work entitled *Genji-e chinjō (A Petition on Genji Paintings)*. This text documents a debate surrounding the production of *Genji-e* done in 1252 on *shikishi* (paper-squares or album leaves) affixed to screens for the shogun Prince Munetaka (1242–1274). The