CHAPTER THREE

WORSHIPPING HITOMARO: FROM TEXT TO IMAGE

On the sixteenth day of the Sixth Month of Gen’ei (1118), Fujiwara (Rokujo) no Akisue, Head of the Bureau of Palace Repairs (Shuri no daibu), gathered a small group of men, consisting mainly of family members but also including the prominent poet Minamoto no Shunrai (Toshiyori) (1055?–1129?), at his mansion in the Sixth Ward. The gathering had been convened for a poetic event unlike any other to date: the presentation of offerings to a portrait of Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, who was to be celebrated as a great poetic sage whose talent for poetry was a gift divinely bestowed. Known as Hitomaro eigu (Hitomaro portrait-offerings), this ceremony was an epochal development in Hitomaro’s reception and a crucial turning point in the process of his deification. Largely based on Chinese models like the Confucian shidian (Japanese sekiten) ceremony and also influenced by the ancestral worship ceremonies of esoteric Buddhism (mikkyo), the Hitomaro eigu implicitly casts Hitomaro in the role of ancestral teacher, his “school” in this case being the Rokujo house, the first of the medieval poetry houses to be established amidst the larger trends toward professionalism and exclusivity which have been termed the “medievalization” of waka.1

Honji-Suijaku Thought and the Waka Mandala

A key element in the development of Japanese Buddhism was its synthesis with existing Japanese religious beliefs in what came to be known as honji-suijaku, “original ground-manifest trace” thought, which held that the native deities (kami) of Japan were “manifest traces” (suijaku) of the “original ground” (honji), consisting of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This assimilation of kami into the Buddhist pantheon began at the highest level, with the identification of Amaterasu, the sun deity (and

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divine ancestress of the imperial line) with the buddha Mahavairocana (Dainichi), the embodiment of the Ultimate Reality (dharmakaya) in esoteric Buddhist thought. Soon other associations between Buddhist figures and kami were suggested, and by the early Heian period, honji-suijaku thought had become more systematic and basically hierarchical in nature, with the buddhas and bodhisattvas perceived as superior to the kami. However, there continued to be considerable variation among the buddhas or bodhisattvas identified as honji of particular kami. The assimilative tendencies of Buddhism seen here were not unique to its development in Japan; a similar process had occurred much earlier in India, where Hindu deities were absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon, mostly in the form of guardian deities.

The Taimitsu priest Sensai (d. 1127) postulated a honji-suijaku relationship with profound implications for waka and its practitioners when he identified the Sumiyoshi deity (Sumiyoshi daimyōjin), regarded as a deity of waka, as a manifest trace (suijaku) of Kōkitokuō, a bodhisattva who appears in the Nirvana sutra and who is also a form of Kannon. This identification was made in a preface composed by the prominent poet Fujiwara no Mototoshi (d. 1142) and attached to poems which Sensai presented at the Sumiyoshi Shrine during a pilgrimage in the Ninth Month of 1106, in which he sought to expiate the sin engendered by his composition of waka and turn it rather into a means for his enlightenment. The preface reads in part:

If one inquires into Sumiyoshi’s origins, one finds out that the deity is none other than the Kōkitokuō bodhisattva, who, to identify him, gathered the sutras when the Buddha died in the Sala forest and later explained them. The language of the sutras is simple and easy but it is the highest order of excellence... I draw a portrait of the bodhisattva and write a sutra on it and, facing the picture, I expound the meaning of the sutras and pay homage to it in order to repent of my sins. I beg that the sins I committed in life by composing poems will have the contrary effect of bringing me to enlightenment. That is all.

In its appeal for the reversal of the karmic effects of poetic composition, Sensai’s preface clearly echoes the prayer by Bo Juyi (772–846)