

Article

Buddhist Robes That Are and Are Not: Clothing, Desire, and Ambivalent Renunciation in *The Tale of Genji*

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Abstract: This study examines the symbolic ambiguity of Buddhist robes in the Heian period, focusing particularly on their representation in *The Tale of Genji*. While Buddhist monastic garments traditionally signify religious renunciation, they also functioned as fashion items regulated by strict social norms. Through an analysis of Heian-era dress codes and deviations from them, as well as literary portrayals of robes associated with ordination scenes, this study reveals that robes embodied not only religious aspirations but also worldly attachments. Literary depictions highlight the tension between formal religious identity and persistent human desires, demonstrating how Buddhist robes served not only as religious symbols but also as mediators between spiritual ideals and secular emotions. By examining robes as visual and emotional media within a broader cultural and historical framework, this paper argues that Buddhist robes during the Heian period symbolized the complex intersection of salvation and desire. Ultimately, this study sheds light on how religious symbols, rather than representing pure spiritual transcendence, reveal the enduring contradictions inherent in human nature.

Keywords: Buddhism; Buddhist robes; *The Tale of Genji*; the Heian period; the secular world; the Pure Land; monastic renunciation; Japan



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1. Introduction

Generally, wearing a *kesa* (袈裟, Buddhist stole) is understood to signify accepting the mind of the Buddha into oneself (Kyuma 2000, p. 2). This notion indicates that donning Buddhist robes upon entering religious life is an act of embodying the spirit of the Buddha and assuming the religious and ethical responsibility of living according to Buddhist teachings. Nevertheless, Buddhist robes are, in reality, garments worn on the human body, and it is undeniable that they also constitute a form of fashion. If fashion is regarded as a device that constantly renders the human body into an object to be seen by others (Hirayoshi 2004, p. 50), then Buddhist robes, too, do not necessarily carry purely sacred meaning in everyday life.

As Roland Barthes has argued in *The Fashion System*, fashion functions as a kind of language—a system of signs that constructs and communicates meaning. This view suggests that clothing, including religious attire, can be seen as participating in the broader cultural production of meaning, rather than being limited to functional or sacred roles (Barthes [1967] 1990).

Historically, it is evident that Buddhist robes have not only served as religious symbols but have also embodied elements of fashion and secular significance. In particular, the Heian period in Japan saw this duality become especially pronounced. During this era,

Japanese culture began to emerge distinctly from traditional Chinese models across various domains. Buddhism, too, was developing its own uniquely Japanese character, and this influence extended to the vestments worn by monks. Significant transformations occurred in the forms of Buddhist robes, shifting from modest, austere styles to increasingly elaborate and ornate ones. From the standpoint of understanding robes as manifestations of religious spirit, this phenomenon is especially noteworthy. Furthermore, the styles of Buddhist robes that took shape during the Heian period have been inherited by nearly all major Buddhist sects that continue to exist in Japan today, including Tendai (天台宗, Tendai sect), Shingon (真言宗, Shingon sect), Jōdo (浄土宗, Jōdo sect), Jōdoshin (浄土真宗, Jōdoshin sect), Nichiren (日蓮宗, Nichiren sect), and Kegon (華嚴宗, Kegon sect) (Izutsu 1977, pp. 117–19). Considering these points, it is clear that the Heian period holds critical significance for understanding the current form of Buddhism and Buddhist robes in Japan.

In recent years, renewed cultural interest in the Heian period and its Buddhist culture has emerged in Japan. For instance, the NHK historical drama *Hikaru Kimi e* (“光る君へ Dear Radiance”), broadcast from 7 January to 15 December 2024, depicted the life of Murasaki Shikibu, the author of *The Tale of Genji*, against the backdrop of Heian aristocratic society and attracted significant public attention. The drama achieved an average viewership rating of 10.7% across its entire run, and particularly noteworthy was its internet streaming performance, reaching an average of 378,000 unique views by episode 45—the highest record in Taiga drama history (Terui 2024, 16 December 2024). While previous Taiga dramas typically focused on periods of historical upheaval such as the Sengoku or Bakumatsu eras, often depicting dynamic battles and political intrigue, *Hikaru Kimi e* stood out by eschewing such themes in favor of portraying the elegant lifestyles and cultural sophistication of the Heian aristocracy. Although there were initial concerns about lower viewership, the drama ultimately garnered high praise and has been reported as pioneering a new possibility for Taiga dramas without a war-centered setting—a so-called “cultural Taiga” (Sponichi Annex 2025, 21 April 2025).

Following the success of this drama, numerous related television programs, publications, and exhibitions on the Heian period and *The Tale of Genji* were organized. Notably, growing attention has been paid to the Buddhist culture of the Heian period. Exhibitions and publications on Heian Buddhist art have proliferated, and public interest in Buddhist thought, rituals, and clothing culture has reached broader audiences (Ōtsu City Museum of History 2024; Tokyo News Books 2025).

In this way, the Buddhist culture of the Heian period continues to acquire new meaning as a vital cultural heritage even in the present day. Therefore, reconsidering how Buddhism influenced both society and individual spiritual lives during that time is a task of significant contemporary relevance. This paper focuses on how, in the Heian period, the act of monastic renunciation—considered the culmination of Buddhist faith—did not necessarily lead to inner peace or liberation from worldly desires. Particular attention will be given to the portrayal in *The Tale of Genji* of characters who, even after undergoing the religious turning point of renunciation, remain haunted by memories and desires of the secular world.

Based on this perspective, this study seeks to answer the following questions: How did Buddhist robes function not only as religious vestments but also as emotional and symbolic mediators in the Heian period? What do the representations of robes in *The Tale of Genji* reveal about the blurred boundaries between sacred intent and secular memory?

By examining how these characters continue to struggle internally while wearing sacred Buddhist robes, this study aims to illuminate the multifaceted meanings and functions that Buddhist vestments may have embodied, beyond serving merely as univocal symbols of sacredness.

2. The Secularization and Aristocratization of Buddhism and Buddhist Robes in the Heian Period

Buddhism, which originated in India and was transmitted to China, was introduced to Japan in 552, when a statue of the Buddha and Buddhist scriptures were brought by emissaries of King Seongmyeong (聖明王) of Baekje (百濟), a kingdom on the Korean Peninsula. Thereafter, Buddhism was accepted as a form of ethnic religion in Japan, balancing with indigenous beliefs and serving functions such as ancestral rites and prayers for healing. During the Nara period (710–784), it developed into a form of state Buddhism. In the subsequent Heian period (794–1185), Buddhism gradually approached the retired emperors and the regent families, becoming increasingly aristocratized and transforming into a means for the aristocracy to fulfill their secular desires (Sonoda 1985, p. 847).

Particularly from the 10th to the mid-11th century, Buddhism responded to the anxieties fostered among the aristocracy by the social changes accompanying the formation of the regency system. During this time, Pure Land teachings emphasizing salvation in the next life and Esoteric practices focusing on worldly benefits developed side by side. The increasing proximity between Buddhist monks and the aristocracy led to the aristocratization of the Buddhist institutions themselves. Major temples, in exchange for aristocratic patronage, accepted sons of noble families into important clerical positions, transitioned their economic base to donated estates (shōen), and turned local temples into subordinate branches, thereby becoming massive centers of power. This close relationship significantly shaped both Buddhist rituals and theories of salvation during the Heian period. (Hayami 1991, pp. 440–41).

Moreover, the secularization of monks progressed, and coupled with the frequent occurrence of natural disasters, significant transformations appeared in Buddhist thought itself. The most prominent developments were the emergence of the “Mappō thought” (末法思想) and the widespread “Pure Land faith” (浄土信仰). Mappō thought held that following the death of the Buddha, Buddhism would pass through three successive stages—Shōbō (正法, the age of true law), Zōbō (像法, the age of semblance law), and Mappō (末法, the age of degenerate law)—culminating in its eventual decline. Originally intended to correct the mindset of practitioners, in the Heian period, it came to be accepted as a doctrine explaining the collapse of social order and reflecting the anxieties of the aristocracy. Especially in Japan, where 1052 was regarded as the beginning of the age of Mappō, a sense of impermanence and world-weariness spread, and faith in the Pure Land, centered on chanting the name of Amida Buddha to attain rebirth there, flourished (Osumi 1999, pp. 969–70).

These institutional aristocratizations and ideological shifts are clearly reflected in the development of Buddhist robes worn by monastics. Needless to say, with the transmission of Buddhism to Japan came the religious vestments of monks and nuns. However, because these garments were originally designed for the tropical climates of India, their direct transplantation to Japan—after passing through China and the Korean Peninsula—proved difficult. For instance, in India, the practice of exposing the right shoulder (偏袒右肩, hendan-uken) was considered a proper gesture, but in Japan, where the climate was colder and exposing the skin was viewed as improper, a new style was devised that covered the right shoulder (Nasu 1961, pp. 2–3).

Such adaptations to local climate and customs were eventually codified into law. The Yōrō Code (養老律令, 718), which regulated the behavior of monks and nuns in ancient Japan, explicitly prescribed standards for their attire (Izutsu 1977, p. 46). According to the Yōrō Code, monks’ and nuns’ clothing was restricted to subdued colors such as *mokuran* (木蘭, magnolia purple), *seiheki* (青碧, blue-green), *kuri* (皁, blackish brown), *ki* (黃, yellow), and *eshiki* (壊色, faded/ruined color), and luxurious fabrics such as *ra* (羅, sheer silk),

nishiki (錦, brocade), and *ki* (綺, fine silk/twill silk) were prohibited. Furthermore, violators of these dress codes faced harsh punishments, such as ten days of penal servitude for wearing unauthorized materials and one hundred days of penal servitude for donning secular garments (養老律令, 218).

The very existence of these prohibitions suggests that even at that time, there was already a tendency to produce and wear Buddhist robes made of luxurious materials and vivid colors (Izutsu 1977, p. 46). With the enactment of the Engishiki (延喜式) in 967—a legal code that comprehensively organized existing regulations and practices—the secularization of monastic robes became even more apparent. For example, during the seven-day Buddhist ritual from 8 to 14 January to pray for the nation's peace, based on the *Konkomyō Saishō Ōkyō* (金光明最勝王經, The Golden Light Sutra), invited monks were recorded as wearing garments woven in pale purple and deep scarlet brocades (Engishiki 1990, p. 503).

Thus, as Buddhism grew increasingly intertwined with aristocratic society during the Heian period, becoming a monk was not only a path to spiritual liberation but also a means of acquiring worldly status and prestige. Buddhist robes, likewise, gradually followed a trajectory of beautification (Izutsu 1977, p. 118). Originally, Buddhist robes were meant to signify the overcoming of secular desires and the pursuit of eternal enlightenment. However, by the Heian period, robes had paradoxically become tools for expressing worldly desires and authority.

In this way, Buddhist robes during the Heian period, while nominally adapting to climate, custom, and legal regulations, came to carry multiple meanings intertwined with social status, secular ambition, and ceremonial display. This symbolic instability of Buddhist robes was vividly reflected in the literary works of the time.

In the next section, I will examine various representations of Buddhist robes in *The Tale of Genji* and clarify how these garments did not always function as straightforward symbols of religious devotion or renunciation.

3. The Buddhist World of *The Tale of Genji* and Buddhist Robes as a Representational Device

During the Heian period, Buddhist thought was deeply intertwined with every major stage of human life, from birth to funeral rites. Previous studies on the nature of Buddhist thought and practice during this era have primarily focused on the analysis of documentary sources, such as sutras and legal codes. However, such documents merely depict an idealized form of Buddhism; to truly understand how people of the Heian period practiced their faith, it is necessary to examine not only these idealized records but also the realities of daily life (Kim 2024, pp. 127–40).

In light of this research context, *The Tale of Genji*—a work so deeply imbued with a Buddhist worldview that it could hardly exist without it—must be considered an extremely important source for studying the religious culture of the Heian period (Osumi 1994, p. 11). A considerable body of scholarship has examined *The Tale of Genji* from a Buddhist perspective, employing diverse methodologies to explore its religious background, quotations from Buddhist scriptures, the narrative functions of monastic figures, and various other religious elements embedded in the text. Despite this wide-ranging scholarship, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the descriptions of Buddhist robes—particularly their symbolic function within the narrative. This article seeks to address that gap by analyzing such depictions of clothing as a visual and symbolic medium through which the process of religious transition and renunciation is represented in Heian-period culture.

Written around the year 1000 by Murasaki Shikibu, who served Empress Fujiwara no Shōshi (藤原彰子), the novel depicts both the dazzling surface of court life and the inner sufferings of its characters, centering around the idealized figure of Genji. The text is

notable not only for its frequent quotations from Buddhist sutras such as the Lotus Sutra (法華經) and the Contemplation Sutra (觀無量壽經), but also for its detailed descriptions of Buddhist rituals based on these teachings. In addition, numerous monks and nuns appear throughout the narrative and play important roles in its development. In scenes featuring Buddhist rituals or religious figures, the garments they wear—their Buddhist robes—are often carefully described.

This symbolic significance of clothing becomes even more apparent when we consider that, in the Heian period, various forms of gift exchange occurred among members of the imperial and aristocratic classes. This was largely due to the fact that, in a society where a monetary economy was underdeveloped, clothing and textiles served as important substitutes for currency (Umemura 1986, pp. 21–38).

The Tale of Genji also reflects this reality. Buddhist robes appear not only as commemorative gifts for acquaintances who have entered monastic life but also as offerings to monks participating in Buddhist ceremonies. Examples include robes presented to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of a retired emperor who had become a monk, as well as offerings made to monks officiating at memorial services, ceremonies for the consecration of Buddhist images, and rituals honoring the Lotus Sutra.

In particular, in *The Tale of Genji*, Buddhist robes often symbolize the critical moment of leaving the secular world and embarking on the path to spiritual liberation. The following passage depicts the scene where the Retired Emperor Suzaku-in undergoes ordination:

Though the Retired Emperor Suzaku-in (朱雀院) was tormented by great pain, he endured it patiently and gathered his strength. Since this ceremony—his daughter's coming-of-age ritual—was now completely over, three days passed, and at last, he had his hair shaved off.... “There are limits to how far one can go in caring for one's children. How heartrending it is to part from them like this,” he said, his resolve seeming about to falter. But he forced himself to lean on the armrest. Then, with the abbot of the mountain temple and three precept masters in attendance, he began to put on his Buddhist robes, and the ceremony marking his departure from this world was unbearably sorrowful. (Murasaki Shikibu 1996–1998, vol. 4, p. 44)

The Tale of Genji is a work that relentlessly explores human suffering and sorrow. When faced with illness, aging, and the prospect of death, its characters often seek to renounce the world, praying for salvation in the afterlife through monastic renunciation. A representative example is the Retired Emperor Suzaku-in.

Having become increasingly frail with age and illness, Suzaku-in wished to attain rebirth in the Pure Land but struggled to make the decision to renounce the world due to his deep affection for his daughter. Only after her coming-of-age ceremony and marriage were secured did he find peace of mind and finally take monastic vows. What is particularly noteworthy is that this long-delayed and momentous transition into religious life is symbolically represented by the act of “putting on Buddhist robes”. The idea that clothing can convey a specific message about the wearer's situation has long been a conventional literary device (Solomon 1985, p. 15). Clothing thus carries highly charged symbolic meanings, and this applies equally in the religious sphere. In the Heian period, when Mappō thought and faith in the Pure Land dominated people's minds, the depiction of donning Buddhist robes in *The Tale of Genji* functioned as a particularly powerful representational device for signaling the act of renunciation.

4. Contradictory Desires Reflected in Buddhist Robes

4.1. Attachment to One's Child and the Quest for Liberation

During the Heian period, Buddhism served as the very spirit of the age, and monks who entered the Buddhist order were required to wear robes that conformed to their social rank, as stipulated by the *ritsuryō* legal codes. In ancient society, clothing strictly reflected the rigid social hierarchy, and individuals were allowed to wear garments only within the bounds permitted for their status.

Nevertheless, even though strict regulations on dress existed under the *ritsuryō* system, there were cases in which individuals appeared at court in private garments that deviated from official prescriptions. Such deviations were not merely violations of norms but also served as symbols of special privilege and are seen as important indicators of the political structure and its transformations in the Heian court (Nakai 2018, p. 2).

This phenomenon of deviation from official dress codes is also observable in *The Tale of Genji*. For example, aristocrats who entered monastic life are sometimes depicted wearing robes that slightly differed from the prescribed forms after their renunciation. This was not simply a breach of norms; rather, these deviations may have functioned as expressions layered with meanings such as a sense of privilege, residual secular attachment, or complex religious sentiments.

The following scene depicts the Retired Emperor Suzaku-in, who, having supposedly severed all ties with the secular world through ordination, descends from his mountain retreat upon hearing that his daughter, who had recently given birth and was in poor health, wished to take religious vows herself:

The Retired Emperor Suzaku-in (朱雀院) said, “I had resolved to renounce all ties to the secular world,” he said, “but in the end, I could not extinguish my worldly attachments. It was the darkness of a parent’s heart, unable to let go of a beloved child. I even began to neglect my devotions, and the thought that my daughter might pass away before me filled me with sorrow. I feared that if such a thing came to pass, and we had not seen each other one last time, we would both be left with lingering resentment. And so, disregarding the judgment of the world, I came here.”

Though his appearance had changed upon taking the tonsure and renouncing the world, he still retained an elegant and gentle charm. Clad not in formal Buddhist robes, but in graceful *sumizome* (墨染, ink-colored monastic robes), he appeared all the more serene and refined, and Genji could not help but gaze upon him with admiration. As often happened, tears welled up in his eyes. (Murasaki Shikibu 1996–1998, vol. 4, p. 304)

Suzaku-in, after ordination, was ostensibly committed to continued practice in pursuit of salvation in the afterlife. Yet, out of concern for his daughter's health, he descended from his mountain retreat and returned to the secular world. At that time, the robe he wore was described as not formal Buddhist robes—in other words, it deviated from strict religious regulations.

Given his unique status as a retired emperor turned monk (*hōō* 法皇), it is possible that he was not bound by the same strict dress codes as ordinary monks (Kondo 2007, p. 216). However, rather than focusing solely on the formal deviation, it is more important to note the ambiguity embodied in his appearance: he was clad not in fully formal Buddhist robes, but nonetheless in *sumizome* robes, bearing traces of monastic identity.

In Buddhist teachings, even parental love, if accompanied by attachment, is classified as a *klesha*—a source of suffering (Okada 2012, p. 144). Among these, attachment to one's children is considered one of the most deep-rooted and difficult passions to sever, particularly for those undertaking religious training. Suzaku-in, profoundly attached to his daughter, is depicted as a tender-hearted figure who wavers even in his commitment to religious life. The description of him wearing improper Buddhist robes thus symbolizes his inability to fully embody the purity and strictness expected of a true renunciant; his heart remains entangled with secular emotions, specifically his love for his daughter. His attire, which falls short of the formal standards, vividly reveals the pull of worldly attachments that still linger within him.

At the same time, however, although the robes he wears are not formal Buddhist robes, the fact that he dons *sumizome* robes still indicates a tenuous preservation of his aspiration toward salvation in the next life. He has not entirely returned to secular life; a faint commitment to religious ideals remains.

This ambiguous attire encapsulates the internal conflict between two opposing desires: the attachment to his child and the yearning for rebirth in the Pure Land. As Motomiya has pointed out, Suzaku-in's figure reveals an intersection between two stances: the role of a father and the identity of a renunciant (Motomiya 2006, p. 299). The emotions and attire portrayed here do not merely illustrate the feelings of an individual father; they raise fundamental questions about the very nature of monastic renunciation within aristocratic society.

In short, the portrayal of Suzaku-in wearing robes that are not proper Buddhist robes is not simply an instance of deviation in dress. It symbolizes the deeply rooted human conflict between attachment and the aspiration for salvation, a duality that profoundly disrupts the rigid religious meanings traditionally associated with Buddhist vestments. It also sharply illuminates the secularization of monastic life within the aristocracy of the Heian period.

4.2. Attachment to the Opposite Sex Reflected in the Gift of Buddhist Robes

Human desire, which seeks simultaneously to fulfill two mutually contradictory aspirations—worldly attachment and salvation in the afterlife—is vividly symbolized in the ambiguous representations of religious robes. This ambiguity is not limited to parental attachment but is also depicted as lingering desire toward members of the opposite sex.

In *The Tale of Genji*, one of Genji's lovers, Lady Naishi-no-Kami, is portrayed as a woman of noble birth, striking beauty, and a passionate nature, making her one of the characters through whom the complexities of romantic love are most richly explored. Originally intended to marry the Emperor Suzaku, she unexpectedly fell in love with Genji, and their relationship, once discovered, prevented her formal entrance into the imperial court. Although her father wished for her to marry Genji, opposition from others made such a union impossible, and ultimately, she became the wife of Emperor Suzaku, who still harbored feelings for her. Lady Naishi-no-Kami, favored for her beauty and temperament, continued to maintain a secret relationship with Genji even after her marriage. Although Emperor Suzaku never publicly rebuked her, the ongoing affair is thought to have contributed to tensions within the court. After Emperor Suzaku abdicated and became the Retired Emperor Suzaku-in, he took monastic vows. Lady Naishi-no-Kami, still involved with Genji, ultimately decided—without informing Genji—to follow Suzaku-in's path and renounce the world herself. Upon learning of her decision, Genji, deeply moved, sought to prepare and send her Buddhist robes.

Genji said, “As for Lady Naishi-no-Kami, since she has changed her appearance upon entering religious life, it would be proper to assist her, at least while she is still unaccustomed to cutting and sewing her new garments. But how does one sew a kesa (袈裟, Buddhist stole), I wonder? Please see to it. I shall ask the Lady of the East Wing at Rokujō to take charge of one set. If they resemble proper Buddhist robes too closely, they might appear disturbingly solemn and somewhat alienating in appearance. Still, it would be nice if they retained something of the spirit of Buddhism,” he said. (Murasaki Shikibu 1996–1998, vol. 4, p. 265)

Genji, as a gift for the newly ordained Naishi-no-Kami, requested garments that would not constitute formal nuns' robes but would nonetheless retain a Buddhist aesthetic. This statement can be interpreted as expressing a desire for clothing that, while not bound by rigid religious conventions, would still evoke a sacred atmosphere. However, hidden within this seemingly paradoxical request lies Genji's complex emotions toward her, going beyond mere aesthetic considerations.

The phrase “proper Buddhist robes” implies her complete transition into the status of a fully ordained nun. In that case, Genji would no longer be permitted to harbor romantic feelings toward her. Thus, he seeks to avoid her donning “proper Buddhist robes”. This expression symbolizes not merely an aesthetic concern but Genji's lingering attachment, manifesting through the medium of clothing.

At the same time, the garments worn by Lady Naishi-no-Kami must publicly signify her current position as both the wife of the Retired Emperor Suzaku-in and a woman who has entered religious life. Regardless of Genji's private wishes, she faces a social obligation to wear appropriate monastic attire. Clothing is not simply decorative; it serves as a means to visually manifest the wearer's social and religious identity (Tankha 2022, p. 398).

What is particularly striking is Genji's contradictory desire: he seeks to prevent her from wearing “proper Buddhist robes” while still wishing her garments to retain a Buddhist aura. Within this contradiction lies Genji's dual yearning—to keep her by his side as a lover, while simultaneously wishing her to be publicly recognized as a renunciant. The very nature of clothing and fashion inherently contains such duality: clothing simultaneously attracts others while also signaling modesty (Kawamura 2005, pp. 5–6). Genji's conflicted wish embodies precisely this essential duality inherent in garments.

This duality is further illuminated when considering that in the Heian period, the act of gifting clothing carried profound symbolic significance, as garments were often regarded as extensions or substitutes for the giver's own body (Namae 2022, p. 14). From this perspective, the garments Genji sought to bestow upon Naishi-no-Kami were imbued with his own emotions. In other words, the robes he intended to give were not merely expressions of her new religious status but were laden with his lingering desire for her to remain connected to him. Through this ambiguous form of clothing, it becomes vividly clear how garments can simultaneously symbolize human desire while artfully concealing it.

4.3. *The Secular World Reflected Through Buddhist Robes*

Ukifune, who appears in the latter half of *The Tale of Genji*, is portrayed as a tragically fated figure. Torn between two men, she attempts to drown herself in despair, but fails to die and collapses, only to be rescued by Sōzu (僧都, high priest), who happened upon her by chance.

Figure 1 illustrates the moment when Sōzu discovers the collapsed Ukifune and rushes toward her.



Figure 1. Sōzu rescuing Ukifune, who has collapsed, as depicted in an illustration from *The Tale of Genji*. 19.8 × 26.0 cm. Artist: Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1539–1613). Artwork title: *Genji Monogatari Tekagami* (源氏物語手鑑, *A Calligraphic Album of the Tale of Genji*). Collection: Kuboso Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi. Image reproduced from the Digital Museum of the Kuboso Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi, with permission.

This illustration is one example of *Genji-e* (源氏絵, Genji-themed paintings), artworks based on *The Tale of Genji*. Lavishly adorned with gold and silver, the painting is noted for its vivid and richly detailed expression and has been highly praised for its artistic merit (Kuboso Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi 1985, p. 2). Since the inception of *The Tale of Genji*, *Genji-e* have been produced in various formats, including illustrated handscrolls, booklets, fan paintings, and folding screens, and have also been widely used as designs for crafts. One distinctive feature of *Genji-e* is that, rather than allowing artists to freely choose subjects, specific scenes—including their compositional iconography—have been faithfully reproduced across generations, sometimes with little variation even between artworks produced in different historical periods (Inamoto 2018, p. 4). In particular, compositions featuring a monk clad in a kesa and a woman had already been established prior to this artwork, indicating that this scene was regarded as one of the most important and influential themes within the *Genji-e* tradition (Inamoto et al. 2021, p. 145).

On the right side of the composition, Ukifune—a delicate young woman—lies face down, collapsed on the ground. To the left, a shaven-headed monk clad in gray robes hurries toward her, following behind a servant holding a torch. This visual arrangement guides the viewer's gaze across the scene and intensifies the urgency of the rescue. The composition emphasizes contrasts—stillness and movement, passivity and intervention—thereby suggesting not only physical salvation but also hinting at the emotional unrest and spiritual transition that Ukifune is about to undergo.

At the center of this composition is the monk, whose character reveals a paradoxical nature: while he is depicted as a figure of Buddhist salvation, he also shows sensitivity to beauty and human connection—being drawn to Ukifune's feminine charm and intrigued by her handsome younger brother. As such, he is understood as a conflicted figure, suspended between sacred purity and worldly desire (Suzuki 2005, p. 73). The implication that Ukifune's ordination was facilitated by such a complex and internally divided indi-

vidual invites further scrutiny into the nature of her renunciation—a matter that will be explored in the following discussion.

Moreover, the recurrence of this particular composition across generations suggests not only the establishment of a standardized iconography but also the possibility that it symbolically reflects the nuanced emotional states of the characters involved. In this way, the scene of Ukifune's rescue and ordination—centered on Buddhist salvation and the donning of sacred robes—serves as a visually and symbolically significant turning point in the narrative development of *The Tale of Genji*.

Later, Ukifune, having coincidentally encountered Sōzu at her residence, desperately pleaded with him and impulsively took tonsure to become a nun. However, her ordination was not the result of long-prepared religious devotion but rather a desperate and impulsive act born from suffering in love and a desire for escape.

When Shōshō no Ama rushed back upon hearing the news that Ukifune had begun the ritual for ordination, she found that Ukifune had already been dressed, in a purely formal manner, in Buddhist robes and a kesa belonging to Sōzu. The original passage reads:

One of the maidservants came alone and informed Shōshō no Ama (少将の尼 Nun Shōshō) of what was happening. Startled, Shōshō no Ama hurried back, only to find that Ukifune had already been dressed—purely for form's sake—in the Buddhist robes and a kesa (袈裟 Buddhist stole) belonging to Sōzu (僧都 high priest). At Sōzu's prompting, she was told, "Please pay your respects to your parents' side." But she was so overwhelmed that she could not restrain her emotions, and she burst into tears, not knowing where to turn.

(Murasaki Shikibu 1996–1998, vol. 6, pp. 338–39)

Ukifune's ordination, lacking the proper religious preparation, was hastily conducted using the ritual implements that Sōzu happened to have at hand. As a result, Ukifune entered religious life wearing borrowed robes—an extraordinarily irregular and symbolically charged event.

Especially in Buddhism, the act of donning the kesa is not merely putting on clothing; it is considered an important ritual act embodying the very heart of the Buddha (Kyuma 2000, p. 2). Therefore, Ukifune's ordination, performed using another's kesa, can be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of the formalization and hollowing out of religious meaning, or a rift between body and faith. This rift becomes even more pronounced in the following scene, where Ukifune, now a nun, overlays her monastic robes with memories of her past secular life, thus illustrating her emotional pull back toward worldly desires.

Ama-gimi (尼君 the nun) put down her hurried sewing and came over, asking with concern, "How are you feeling, my lady?" One of the women layered a scarlet underrobe beneath a cherry-blossom patterned gown and said, "This is what I had always hoped to dress Your Ladyship in. What a sorrowful sight it is, to see you now in such dreary sumizome (墨染 ink-colored monastic robes)."

Ukifune gazed at the garments and composed the following verse:

O robes of ink-dyed hue,
now worn upon this altered self—
upon you I lay this radiant sleeve,
keepsake of days gone by,
and recall the self I used to be.

She wrote it down with a heavy heart and thought to herself, "What a shame... If I were to die, nothing remains hidden in this world. People may hear of this

and wonder, ‘Was she hiding herself so completely because she had something to be ashamed of?’”

Troubled by such thoughts, she then spoke with composed grace: “Though I had long forgotten all that had passed, seeing such finely prepared garments brings a faint, sorrowful feeling.” (Murasaki Shikibu 1996–1998, vol. 6, pp. 360–61)

After Ukifune’s ordination, scenes depict Ama-gimi and the other women sewing splendid garments intended as gifts for others. They glance at the gorgeous clothing at hand and, contrasting it with the plain nun’s robes Ukifune now wears, express their regret, wishing she could have worn such beautiful garments instead. This scene illustrates that, although Ukifune has ostensibly severed ties with the secular world, she remains an object of others’ gaze. Her robes, while symbolizing religious devotion, simultaneously evoke secular aesthetics and memories of her past life.

Fashion, as has been argued, constantly transforms the human body into something that is looked at, that is made visible, and to speak of fashion is to articulate the processes through which bodies have been constructed as objects of gaze (Hirayoshi 2004, p. 50). In light of this perspective, Ukifune’s body—despite having supposedly renounced secular desires through ordination—remains exposed to the gaze of others, further highlighting the ambivalent meanings embedded in her attire.

In this way, the strong visual contrast between the opulent garments being sewn for gift-giving and the dreary sumizome robes worn by Ukifune does more than merely differentiate colors or designs; it symbolizes an inversion of meanings attributed to clothing. Nun’s robes, which should represent a religious turning point, here become instead a medium that recalls the secular past. Thus, through the visual intersection of religious symbols (nun’s robes) and worldly memories (beautiful garments), Ukifune’s inner conflict—between religious aspiration and secular attachment—is vividly brought to the surface.

The nun’s robes that Ukifune wears act not only as symbols of religious ritual but also as sensory devices that awaken desire, memory, and emotional attachments, both for the observer and for Ukifune herself. Caught between the dual values of religious renunciation and secular return, her inner world is symbolically expressed through the medium of Buddhist robes.

5. Conclusions

Clothing and the social norms that regulate it possess a long history and a complex system of meanings. In ancient Japanese society, strict legal codes dictated which garments were permissible for each social class, and the attire worn in Buddhist contexts followed similar constraints. As a result, deviating from these dress codes was perceived as an act with profound symbolic weight—more so than it would be in contemporary times.

During the Heian period, the Buddhist doctrine of mappō (the Age of the Degenerate Dharma) cast a shadow over the hearts of the people, prompting them to long for salvation in the afterlife rather than in this world. They aspired to attain enlightenment through renunciation and monastic practice, but it was difficult to completely sever attachments to power and pleasure. Ordination was frequently postponed until the last possible moment—often only occurring when one fell seriously ill and sensed death approaching, as a final means to secure rebirth in the next world (Mitsuhashi 2006, p. 386).

Even after entering the monastic path, however, it was difficult to direct one’s mind solely toward the afterlife. Attachments to children and lovers left behind in the secular world pulled practitioners back into worldly desire. This inner contradiction—oscillating between the longing for salvation and the pull of earthly attachments—is symbolically encapsulated in statements that express a wish to wear garments that are not “proper Buddhist robes” but nonetheless possess a “Buddhist appearance”. These “Buddhist Robes

That Are and Are Not” represent a symbolic mode of dress generated by Heian-period individuals caught between religiosity and secular desire.

To understand the distinctive nature of Buddhist robes in the Heian period, it is essential to first consider their original meaning at the time of Buddhism’s founding. In ancient India, when Śākyamuni established Buddhism, monastic robes were known as tricīvara—three rectangular cloths that together formed the official attire of monks. These robes were made of unattractive colors (kaśāya, meaning “muddy-colored”), intentionally patched together from discarded cloth, and constructed from humble materials. They functioned as visual markers of the Buddhist values of overcoming craving, detachment from desire, and embracing simplicity and contentment (Izutsu 1991, pp. 535–36). As such, robes were a device that visually embodied the renunciate’s commitment to rejecting worldly desire.

However, in the context of Japan’s Heian period, the symbolic function of such garments underwent a fundamental transformation. As Buddhism became increasingly entangled with aristocratic society, monastic robes grew more refined in material, color, and tailoring—at times even acquiring decorative flourishes. More importantly, beyond these external changes, the robes no longer simply functioned as devices to suppress desire; rather, they began to evoke unextinguished longings and unresolved attachments. In *The Tale of Genji*, for instance, ordination is often depicted not as a manifestation of spiritual devotion, but as an escape from the emotional deadlocks of secular life. In such scenes, the robes worn by those entering religious life do not merely signify piety—they paradoxically render visible the wearer’s inner turmoil and worldly attachments.

Buddhist robes thus serve not merely as institutional markers but as multilayered media mediating between the inner self and social norms—conveying memory, desire, and emotion to both the wearer and the observer.

In the end, what these garments reflect is not simply religious or institutional order, but the deep contradictions of human nature: the desire for salvation that coexists with the inability to fully relinquish desire. In the past, as in the present, we continue to waver between the demands of regulation and the pull of longing. Even as we seek the compassion of the Buddha, we remain bound by the memories of the world we cannot quite leave behind—a truth that still echoes within us today.

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