

Helen Creese. *Women of the Kakawin World: Marriage and Sexuality in the Indic Courts of Java and Bali*. Armonk (New York) and London: M. E. Sharpe, 2004. 357 plus xiii pages.

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Women of the Kakawin World is a historical study of the experiences of women, in particular royal women and their associates, in the courts of pre-Islamic Java and early modern Bali. Creese draws upon her background in philology to examine the corpus of epic *kakawin* (poems written in Old Javanese in verse) that were composed in those courtly centers over a millennium, as they provide rich insights about the lives of women that are not available from other sources. With its interest in the representations of women, the book makes a valuable contribution to gender studies in Indonesia, the more so since it is focused heavily on the contemporary period. It is also an important study of the social institutions of courtship and marriage. Finally, although this is not the book's main intention, it contributes to knowledge of the *kakawin* genre by analyzing *kakawin* from a new perspective.

Creese devotes the first chapter to a discussion of her sources. She has selected as the core source material a magnificent body of epic *kakawin* that deal thematically and aesthetically with women, marriage, and sexuality while relating the adventures of great heroes and heroines. Included are all of the *kakawin* that were composed in Indian-influenced courts in Central and East Java from the ninth to fifteenth centuries, as well a number of *kakawin* that were composed in courts in Bali and in Balinese courts in western Lombok from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Supplementary source material includes texts that are derivative of Sanskrit literary traditions, such as legal and religious texts, and sculptural reliefs from Java.

Creese acknowledges that she is dealing with an essentially masculine discourse about women, as all of the *kakawin* appear to have been composed by male poets. She also notes that, although the *kakawin* were composed in three geographically separate centers over a thousand years, their depictions of court society and their representations of the women at court are uniform. This leads her to ponder just how faithfully the poets, in their literary creations, have represented the actual lives that women at court led. She concludes that while the *kakawin* reflect the court world of Java and Bali and are not merely imitative of life at Indian courts, they portray an idealized version of court life and the lives of noble women rather than reflecting reality. Creese also addresses the important question of the validity of *kakawin* for the examination of gender as well as their validity as historical sources for the study of the social institutions of courtship and marriage. The evidence that she presents of their value and usefulness for both is convincing.

In later chapters of the book, Creese examines the lives of women at court from birth until death, focusing on the themes of courtship and betrothal, marriage, the women's experiences of sexuality, and the manner of their deaths. Her commentary is heavily interspersed with illustrations from the *kakawin*, treating the reader to some truly beautiful and evocative verse. Creese is herself a formidable philologist and an elegant translator, and the book contains many of her own translations together with excerpts from published *kakawin* translations. The book also benefits greatly from

Creese's partners in the Sekar Iniket *kakawin* translation project who, fortunately for the reader, generously permitted her to include many exquisitely translated, unpublished *kakawin* passages in the book.

I enjoyed Creese's description in Chapter 1 of the inner chambers of the court—where princesses and other royal women are sequestered. It is a predominantly female domain, where the women devote their energies to the maintenance of their physical appearance to enhance their seductive appeal, where love and lovers, real and imaginary, are discussed, where desire, heartache, and intrigue reign supreme. Creese's discussion of *kakawin* sexuality in Chapter 5 is particularly appreciated. Sexual intercourse, sexual pleasure, and eroticism are central elements in *kakawin* marriages, but the tendency among some philologists, especially in the past, has been to dismiss passages that deal with these matters as interpolations.

That the poets are enraptured by and extol the beauty and sexual charms of women is beyond doubt. However, their views of women are patriarchal, and Creese carefully argues that control over women's sexuality and the imposition of restrictions on their agency lie at the heart of the depictions of women in *kakawin*.

Creese's discussion of the social institutions of betrothal and marriage in *kakawin* is as interesting and insightful as her analysis of the repression that royal women experience at the hands of their lovers, husbands, and society at large. There are many instances where the reader may recognize that the accounts of betrothal and marriage in *kakawin* have parallels with the accounts of those institutions by early travelers and more recent visitors to Java, Bali, and Lombok, and also with the situation in those places today.

It is a pity that a book of this caliber has some shortcomings. First is the seemingly haphazard nature of the bibliographic entries. Authors are listed alphabetically, but multiple publications by an author are listed neither alphabetically nor in chronological order, which I found annoying when I used the Bibliography. Second, the illustrative material is unfortunate. It is not easy to judge whether the originals submitted to the publisher are at fault or quality images were reproduced poorly. For example, photo 6.3 is of very poor quality and photo 1.3 is out of focus. Finally, my copy's binding has already begun to part company with its spine. Greater attention to the technical aspects of the book's production would have been welcome.

Apart from those minor irritations, the book contains some wonderfully vivid descriptions and a wealth of information and insight into the social and cultural world of the Indic courts of Java and Bali and the lives that women led there. Creese's writing style is clear, and the book makes for a very satisfying read.