

Women of the kakawin world

- Creese, Helen. 2004. *Women of the kakawin world: marriage and sexuality in the Indic courts of Java and Bali*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe. 357 pp. ISBN 0-7656-0160-5

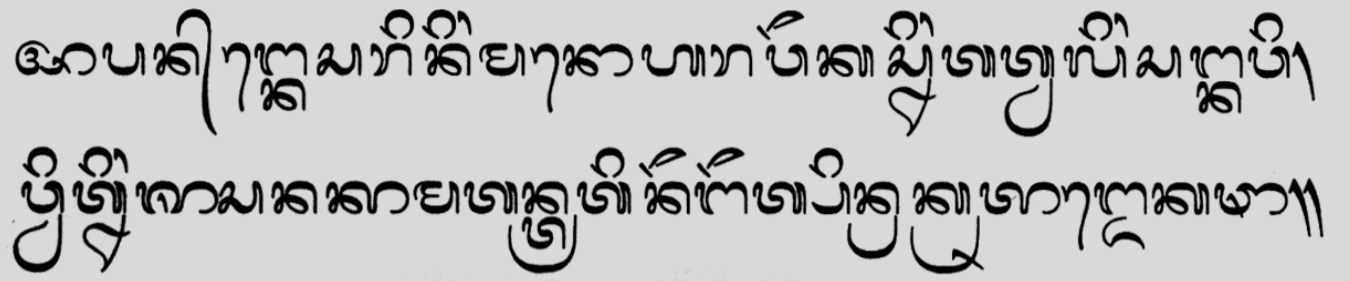
Dick van der Meij

After finishing this book, I suddenly realized I hardly ever read a scholarly work from cover to cover. There is a simple reason I did with this book. As quite rightly put by the author, the subject concerns gems of a hidden literary tradition: kakawin. Over a period of more than 1,000 years, these Old Javanese poems in Indian or Indian-inspired poetic metra constitute a world of beauty quite 'beyond the realm of the senses', as put by Raechelle Rubinstein, or in the words of Helen Creese, 'beyond the power of the senses.'

Kakawin are usually inspired by the great Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and focus on romantic love, poetic lovemaking, idealized nuptial relationships and heroic battles. Kakawin were written in Java, and after the fall of the Hindu empire of Majapahit in the 15th century, in Bali. Most manuscripts containing kakawin texts were copied and composed in Bali, where the practice has continued to the present day. Gems from the Javanese period include the kakawin *Ramayana*, *Bharatayuddha*, *Sumanasantaka*, *Smaradahana* and the popular *Arjunawiwaha*. The Balinese period includes the *Parthayana* (edited by Helen Creese), *Subadrawiwaha* and many more.

Kakawin are, or used to be, transmitted on palm leaf manuscripts in Old Javanese script. Nowadays they are also published on paper, sometimes with a Balinese translation. A (small) number of them have been edited by scholars in Dutch, Indonesian or English. Helen Creese is the most knowledgeable western scholar on the subject alive today.

Women of the Kakawin World leaves the battles and concentrates on aspects of love, courtship, marriage, and their intricacies. The role of women – as exemplary daughters, wives



For here is the soul of all that pleases the heart, the epitome of the essence of beauty, said the Poet, Originating in the doctrines of the sacred Kamatantra, kept ever secret, composed in colloquial form to give birth to tales of wonder.
Mpu Dharmaja, *Burning of Smara* 1:23. 12th century, East Java

and widows – are explored in great detail through Javanese and Balinese kakawin. Their role in the Indic courts was restricted, but by no means insignificant – mostly noble women lived sequestered from the outside world in the inner courts of the palaces, closely guarded by their male relatives and female attendants. The role they played in courtship, marriage, lovemaking and death is described in relation to the men they court, marry and follow in death.

Despite its title, my sense is that the book is not so much about women and female sexuality as it is about gender relations as seen by women. The book presents these female roles by following lives from birth to death. The author has also linked the kakawin world to remaining temple reliefs in Java and to Balinese illustrations of Old Javanese literature, evoking a continuum between the literary world and the world as it might have existed, describing the world depicted in kakawin in such

detail as to enable us to form an idea of the world outside the confines of the literary tradition.

The book is peppered with quotations from 15 kakawin from the Javanese period and 14 from the Balinese period. The English translations provide the reader a unique opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the poems; it is to the great credit of the author that she has translated the Sanskrit-like titles into English to make the poems and her book as accessible as possible. Helen Creese has done an admirable job and has succeeded in opening up the hidden kakawin world for a public much wider than ever before. The book is therefore a must for anyone seriously exploring Asian literature in its widest sense. <

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