

[Atkins on Miller and Copeland, 'Diva Nation'](#)

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The following book review from H-Japan may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Laura Miller, Rebecca L. Copeland, eds.

Reviewer:

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Laura Miller, Rebecca L. Copeland, eds. *Diva Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. xvii + 242 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-29773-9.

Reviewed by E. T. Atkins (Northern Illinois University) **Published on** H-Japan (July, 2019) **Commissioned by** Jessica Starling (Lewis & Clark College)

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If you're going to write about divas, write like a diva. This was apparently what anthropologist Laura Miller and literature scholar Rebecca Copeland set out to do when writing the lively introduction to this collection of profiles of ten real and mythical women who have achieved iconic status in Japanese cultural life. Their conception of "diva" goes well beyond the narrow definition of an operatic prima donna who is "self-important," "temperamental and difficult to please" to include all prominent "unruly" women who "refuse to sit quietly on the sidelines of history" (pp. xi, 3). Despite their eminence in Japanese culture ("These divas are not veiled, unseen, obscure or hidden. They are all too overt"), these women "have not been fully admitted into mainstream scholarship or routine knowledge" (pp. 2, 3). Copeland, Miller, and their eight collaborators subject these figures to serious analysis: not content merely to narrate legends, myths, and life stories, each author presents a cultural biography of her or his chosen diva as a subject of visual art, literature, religious myth, song, film, and press coverage. The result is an illuminating volume with an admirable thematic coherence—and a fun read as well, in no small part because the editors and authors are clearly inspired by their subjects, frequently adopting the divas' unapologetic and defiant voices.

We are generally ambivalent about divas: we celebrate their uncanny talents, but don't necessarily want to live or work with them. Their "difficulty" and "ungovernability" (p. 5) make them challenging artistic collaborators, clients, employees, companions, and romantic partners. Divas invoke "pleasure, obsession, disgust, and other emotions" among the public (p. 4), which is "variously thrilled, shocked, and pleased" by them (p. 3). "The diva serves a purpose for us, she works for us" by "expos[ing] efforts to control femininity and the female body" (p. 7). Divas have—or more precisely, perform—sexualized personas, but the authors insist that these performances are not meant for the titillation of the male gaze. Rather, they are assertions of strength, agency, self-mastery, and power: "Her body perplexes, terrifies, refuses to be owned" (p. 8). Christine Yano and David Holloway add

that divas are both “extraordinary” and “ordinary”: alongside their ostentation, extravagance, and “transgressive freakishness,” they are known and adored for their “attainability and accessibility” and “air of vulnerability.” Audiences identify and sympathize with them through their narratives of personal struggle, “suffering and grit” (pp. 8, 110, 108, 177). Yano’s virtuosic analysis of Misora Hibari emphasizes that despite the entertainer’s “precocious and prodigious talent,” her rise to stardom mirrored postwar Japan’s phoenix-like rise from the ashes of war and defeat and thus embodied “national and historic ordinariness” (p. 99).

Above all, divas are transgressive: the women scrutinized here—most of whom have not previously been identified by the appellation—reliably and (mostly) unapologetically flout standards of social and sexual propriety, conventions of (Japanese) femininity, and rigid gender norms (cross-dressing and androgyny are rife). In doing so, they create new forms of cultural expression, disrupt and upset established orders, and become role models for those in their audience who chafe at the various restrictions divas wantonly disregard. Even unintentionally and reluctantly, in pursuit of their own personal interests and agendas divas provoke broader reflection on structures of patriarchy, national identity, aesthetic convention, conformity, and collectivism. *Diva Nation* pays particular attention to the myriad ways female cultural icons both contribute to and challenge Japanese national narratives, memories, and nostalgia.

Of particular interest here is the reimagining of figures from history and religious myth as divas: creator goddess Izanami and divine exhibitionist Ame no Uzume, deities who appear in Shintō creation myths; Himiko, the first Japanese sovereign about whom we have a reasonably trustworthy historical account; and Izumo no Okuni, the progenitress of *kabuki*. In *Diva Nation*’s preface, Laura Hein describes these four women as “potent sources of imagination in the modern period ... because attempts to minimize their power and significance are so obviously encoded in the official record” (p. xiv). That is, modern artists and writers have reasserted the historical importance of Izanami, Ame no Uzume, Himiko, and Okuni as emblems of an indigenous feminist tradition harking back to a matriarchal antiquity. Copeland examines Kirino Natsuo’s retelling of the Izanami-Izanagi creation myth in her novel *The Goddess Chronicle* (2008). In Kirino’s bitter rendition, Izanami—who was dispatched to the polluted realm of death after dying in childbirth (giving birth to the hot sun will do that to you)—“predicts the status of real-world women” in a patriarchal society (p. 14). Drawing on Tsurumi Shunsuke’s provocative meditations on Uzume, Tomoko Aoyama describes her as a “subversive comic diva” who prefigured contemporary “vagina artist” Rokudenashiko (pp. 47-48). Miller visited various Kinki communities that have appropriated Himiko as a logo or mascot character (*yuru kyara*) for everything from “regional boosterism” and New Age mysticism to an organic, paleolithic Himiko Super Longevity Diet based on the idea that “modern people should eat the same foods as did people in the ancient past” (p. 64). Barbara Hartley argues that novelist Ariyoshi Sawako’s fictionalized biography of Okuni serves as a meditation on the difficulties artistically innovative women face: “Although named ‘best in the world,’ her dazzling talent generated enmity, constantly forcing her to reconstruct herself. Eventually, notwithstanding her indefatigable will, her body gave out” (p. 92).

There are other historical figures whose claims to diva-hood would be equally valid: empress-consort Jingū, purported conqueror of the Korean peninsula; the Nara-period ruler Kōken-Shōtoku; Heian-era satirist Sei Shōnagon; the “beautiful fighting girl” from the Genpei War, Tomoe Gozen; Hōjō Masako, the scheming first regent of the Kamakura *bakufu*; martial artist and Tokugawa loyalist Nakano

Takeko; geisha/stage actress Sada Yakko; modern *kabuki* pioneer Ichikawa Kumechachi—the list goes on. Perhaps a Volume 2 is in order (to which I would gladly contribute a chapter on jazz artist Akiyoshi Toshiko).

A strength of *Diva Nation* is its conceptual coherence; and yet several of the authors offer individual spins, tweaks, and variations on the definition of “diva” laid out in the introduction. Divas are, after all, malleable and subject to “creative productions and reinterpretations” (p. 4). There is no single path to diva-hood, nor do all divas transgress with equal flamboyance and defiant intent. Although Yoko Ono was already forging a purposively obstreperous path before marrying John Lennon, Carolyn Stevens admits that her celebrity was largely due to her being “the world’s most famous widow” and steward of her husband’s legacy (pp. 129-130). In her art and writings, Ono has consistently advocated for significant transformations in social values and behavior. In contrast, by emphasizing “personal, not societal” change and empowerment through beauty work, Jan Bardsley observes, transgender fashionista IKKO “endorse[s]” traditional conventions of “womanliness” (p. 149). Similarly, Amanda Seaman describes author Uchida Shungiku’s “project of sexual liberation [as] an essentially privatized endeavor, rather than a politically or socially activist one” (p. 160). Holloway characterizes author Kanehara Hitomi as a reluctant diva preferring “comfortable anonymity” to recognition as the voice of the millennial “Lost Generation” (pp. 176-177, 183-184). In Masafumi Monden’s analysis, figure skater Asada Mao strategically projects a socially sanctioned “good girl” persona that empowers, rather than undermines, her control over her own career: she offers “a new, and perhaps ‘Japanese,’ way of diva-hood that utilizes her idealized girlish femininity to allow her to exercise authority and power without subjecting herself to the usual derogatory labels applied to powerful women: self-centered, aggressive, and manipulative” (p. 186). The diversity of diva-dom is thus an undercurrent throughout the volume.

Like divas themselves, *Diva Nation* is iconoclastic and difficult to categorize as a work of scholarship, which is not necessarily a problem. The work it most closely resembles is Phyllis Birnbaum’s *Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women* (2000), a collection of biographical portraits of women who could definitely qualify for citizenship in *Diva Nation*. I suppose one could say it is also analogous to Ivan Morris’s *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (1975), in that it uses individual biographies to illustrate broader cultural values and principles.

Some readers might find it problematic to use a cultural icon of Western origin—the diva—to understand and explain the lives, work, and symbolic value of Japanese women. I did wonder as I read if there was a Japanese analogue to the diva that might work just as well or be more appropriate. Ultimately, however, I found the diva hook to be useful for explaining the cultural significance of these individual subjects to an English readership. As the authors say, these women have not been invisible, but neither has their significance been fully understood and appreciated.

In part because it does meet readers halfway with a familiar interpretive hook, *Diva Nation* works especially well in the classroom. I assigned it to my Popular Culture in Japan course in spring 2019 (replacing Birnbaum’s book), where students found it engrossing and easily digestible. In discussion, it was clear that they grasped the subtle variations in diva-hood and the nuances of individual chapters’ arguments. Maybe more of us academic authors should write like divas.

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