Helen Creese

Women of the Kakawin World
Marriage and Sexuality in the Indic Courts of Java and Bali

357pp, 3 maps, 4 tables, 5 figures, 32 photographs,
7 illustrations, glossary, 42 pp notes, bibliography,
appendix of textual sources, index
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reviewed by Lyn Parker

1. Readers of this review might know that Helen is a valued friend and colleague of mine. When she asked me recently to launch her latest book, *Women of the Kakawin World: Marriage and Sexuality in the Indic Courts of Java and Bali*, I accepted without hesitation, even though I had not read the book. I did not hesitate because I knew that it would be excellent. Helen is a true scholar, an expert in a number of fields – most notably in Indonesian history, languages and ancient literatures, but also in women's and gender studies – a writer of simple and elegant prose and an experienced translator of Old Javanese epic poetry. There is only a handful of scholars with such linguistic, literary and historical skills worldwide.

2. When I finally did get around to reading *Women of the Kakawin World*, I found it, as expected, both excellent and readable. I asked the editors of *Intersections* if I could publish my review herein. All this is by way of acknowledging that this review was not written by a neutral outsider, by invitation or by a stranger to the author, but neither is it an 'inside job'.

3. Using mainly the indigenous epic poetry, called *kakawin*, of Java and Bali from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries, Creese has managed to imaginatively enter the elite world within which these poems were created and to draw evocative pictures of the idealised experience of women courtiers, of their emotional lives, the rich minutiae of court ceremonial life and the pleasures and pains of romantic and chivalric love.

4. An aspect of the book which I particularly admire is the way she tackles honestly and in a balanced way issues such as the historical validity of her sources—in other words, the extent to which these poems are fact or fiction. In a field dominated by dead male scholars, many of whom saw little of interest in *kakawin* literature, Creese has pioneered the use of epic poetry as evidence of women's activities and experience in the little-known, pre-modern period of Javanese and Balinese history. She suggests that she has written a 'literary ethnography' (p. 43):

> Perhaps the main benefit of using *kakawin* as historical testimony is that although they may have been written by men and their preservation decreed by patriarchal norms, poets, particularly in their overwhelming interest in love and marriage, do in fact highlight the private rather than the political aspects of the roles of women and men and thus touch on aspects of gender and social relationships that are absent from other indigenous, and most Western, sources (p. 249).

5. In a solid and interesting Introduction, she locates her work within the body of literary sources and historical literature of Indonesia, as well as the rapidly growing corpus of work on gender in Southeast Asia, revealing a mature scholar's broad perspective and a strong grasp of the relevant issues. She addresses issues such as the probable male authorship of the sources (pp. 37-39), the famed high status and autonomy of women in the Indic world of Southeast Asia (e.g. p. 36) and the fact that the poets of *kakawin* present a picture of how society should have been rather than the way society was (p. 42). The Introduction and Conclusion provide a really useful theoretical, literary and historical frame for the study. In the Introduction, the author makes the important point that the paucity of knowledge about the pre-colonial social history of the Indonesian world means that this study makes a
landmark contribution by bringing a feminist and gender-inclusive sensitivity to pre-modern history that can ‘shape the research agenda from the outset’ (p. 35).

6. The body of the book consists of five chapters which describe and analyse court life, courtship and betrothal, marriage, sexuality, and sati – the self-immolation of loyal wives upon the death of their husbands. Themes of love and longing, of marriage, beauty, sexual desire and loyalty unto death weave through detailed and charming descriptions of beautiful princesses and loyal queens. Young princesses languish in the moonlight, scribbling lustful poems on the petals of the pudak flower while they long for their lovers. As brides they are crushed and bloodied by their new husbands’ uncontrollable sexual desire, but later, fortunately, they relax in a warm glow after more enjoyable love-making. Beautiful queens sit through interminable wedding ceremonies and distraught wives hunt through nightmare battlefields strewn with mountains of corpses for their beloved dead husbands.

7. This is a rich social and cultural history of the pre-Islamic Javanese and pre-colonial Balinese courtly world. The focus is on the intimate and private world of the women of the inner court. Each section begins with a translated excerpt of a kakawin, and then the author traces the main themes and features of the topic as they appear in an array of texts. There are frequent quotes from the kakawin and many descriptions of relevant incidents; there are useful treatments of material and ritual culture; there are several discussions of the ways in which the Javanese and Balinese poems depend upon and stray from their Indian originals, the kavya literature, in matters such as the natural environment, the wedding ceremony, the kinship system and types of marriage; there is well-informed analysis of the religious and aesthetic function of kakawin and of kakawin-writing as the poetic ‘cult of beauty’ first described by Zoetmulder (1974) as ‘literary yoga’[1]; and there are sophisticated discussions of much-visited feminist issues such as widow self-immolation.

8. The text is generously complemented with photographs, mainly of stone temple carvings of relevant scenes from the stories of the kakawin corpus, and other illustrations, such as inscribed drawings from palm-leaf manuscripts [lontar], which are often charming.

9. Given the sometimes ancient, often intractable and undoubtedly obscure texts with which Creese was working, I want to particularly mention her hallmark clear prose and smooth and elegant translations of the poetry. Translations of poetry require a special skill. This book reveals both Creese's literary talents and her love for kakawin. She believes that the kakawin genre is 'one of the world's best-kept literary secrets' (p.xii). I can only conclude by adding that this book is an admirable and truly significant attempt to make this wonderful poetry, its romantic heroes and heroines and exotic milieu as accessible as possible to a wide readership.

Endnote