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Extreme Makeover for a Heian-Era Wizard

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Extreme Makeover for a Heian-Era Wizard

Laura Miller (bio)

In 2000, observers of Japanese social life were amazed to see groups of schoolgirls massing at Shintō shrines dedicated to Abeno Seimei, a legendary sorcerer of the Heian era (794–1185 AD). Some noted that

these visitors treated Seimei more like an idol than a *kami* (shrine deity). At a scholarly “culture seminar” on phantoms and the supernatural where Abeno Seimei was one of the topics for discussion, the venue could only hold sixty, but one hundred and twenty people came, many of them schoolgirls who tried to crowd into the room.¹ Girls’ interest in visiting Seimei shrines and hearing lectures about him were only part of a trajectory of exploding fascination with this historic figure. Seimei, a genuine person who most likely lived between 921 and 1005 AD, became the focus of intense cultural energy and was the subject of numerous manga, films, a TV series, novels, anime, and books. The question of why a medieval wizard became a modern icon and folk hero is intrinsically interesting, yet is also a useful case to consider in our exploration of trends in contemporary Japanese popular culture. I believe that his new celebrity status reveals multiple threads that might be fruitful to consider. The example of Abeno Seimei idolatry gives us a unique perspective from which to consider the role of the culture industry in fueling and buttressing [End Page 30] interest in the occult and the possibility of supernatural powers that extend the limits of the human.



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Figure 1.

Painting of Abeno Seimei from the Abeno Ōji Shrine Treasury in Osaka.

Reproduced on the cover of Fujimaki, *Abeno Seimei*.

For one thing, production and consumption of Seimei is an illustration of the power of the girl market. Japanese girls have been driving the consumer economy in numerous ways for more than a decade, forming a rich counterpart to male-inspired *otaku* culture. In medieval folktales, statues, and paintings, Seimei is presented as a grave middle-aged man exemplary of Heian-era masculinity. He has a chubby face, thin eyes, and a pale complexion (Figure 1).² But in the Heisei era (1989–), Seimei has been re-imagined as a *bishōnen*, a beautiful young man with huge eyes, flowing locks, and a sculpted face. One cultural change this indicates is the importance of what we might term the “girl gaze” in popular consumption. Because the aesthetic tastes and desires [End Page 31] of girls are encoded in Seimei imagery, the creators and consumers of Seimei products and representations do not have to actually be girls for the girl gaze to be present. Takahara Eiri’s somewhat different concept of the “consciousness of the girl” is characterized by a valorization of the fantastic.³ Yet both the girl gaze and girl consciousness point to the fact that a girl’s point of view or thinking like a girl is not related to age or sex. As an *onmyōji*, or court practitioner of occult science, Seimei was especially attractive to a female audience in which there had been a preexisting fascination with divination and the occult.⁴ In addition, Seimei challenges the limits of the human with his reputation for having extraordinary magical abilities that point to new realms of human attainment. The combination of mass-culture themes—girls’ desire for *bishōnen* images and interest in the extension of natural human endowment through the use of magic—led to what Malcolm Gladwell might call a “tipping point,” in which a preponderance of factors ensure that a new trend takes off.⁵

Who Was Abeno Seimei?

We know about Seimei and his magical talents from venerable folktales

such as the late Heian collection *Konjaku monogatari shū* (ca. 1000–1100 AD, *Tales of Times Now Past*) and the early Kamakura period *Uji shūi monogatari* (ca. 1190–1242, A collection of tales from Uji). In these compilations Seimei uses his remarkable ability for commanding goblins, channeling spirits, and predicting the future to rescue court nobles and to protect the capital. The story of Seimei's background goes something like this: his father is a...

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