



# Women of the Kakawin World

Marriage and Sexuality in the  
Indic Courts of Java and Bali

Helen Creese

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# Women of the Kakawin World

For Brian, Peter, and Susan

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*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.  
Twelfth century, East Java

## Preface

For more than a millennium, the poets of the Indic courts of Java and Bali composed epic *kakawin* poems in which they re-created the *kakawin* world, the court environment in which they and their royal patrons lived. Yet their endeavors have remained relatively unmarked. Although the academic study of indigenous textual traditions was a hallmark of much humanities scholarship in the colonial period, since World War II these traditions, including *kakawin*, have rarely been incorporated into more broadly focused studies of the culture and history of the Indonesian archipelago. Still produced in Bali in the twenty-first century, *kakawin* have remained of ongoing interest and relevance to Balinese cultural and religious identities. They also provide much of interest for contemporary scholars.

The foundations of this book—the basic empirical spadework of trawling the texts themselves—were laid down many years ago. In his seminal study of Old Javanese literature, *Kalangwan: A Survey of Old Javanese Literature*, published in 1974, the renowned Old Javanese scholar, P.J. Zoetmulder, relying on *kakawin* poetry as the major source for his own work, noted that *kakawin* provide a rich supply of interesting material for a cultural history of ancient Java. In response to his suggestion that the lengthy descriptions of royal weddings represented one such area of potential interest, I devoted one chapter of my doctoral thesis to this topic. It is a reflection of shifts in both my own academic interests and those of Indonesian and Southeast Asian studies more generally that a single chapter has now grown into a full-length book.

This book is multidisciplinary in its focus. Its primary purpose is to document the experiences of women belonging to the *kakawin* world, although the texts, by nature, reveal more about the discourses concerning women, sexuality, and gender than about the historical experiences of individual women. More important, they reflect the ongoing construction

and perpetuation of gender ideologies in Java and Bali, ideologies that are closely linked to and intertwined with the discourses of power that arise from the political, religious, and social institutions of their times. While the principal analytical focus of this book is more on the description of marriage and sexuality as social institutions than on the literary aspects of the *kakawin* genre, because the sources themselves are overwhelmingly literary I hope it will also introduce a wider audience to what is perhaps one of the world's best-kept literary secrets—*kakawin* literature.

In writing this book I have benefited from the advice and encouragement of many colleagues and institutions. My largest debt is to my guru, Dr. S. Supomo, who not only introduced me to Old Javanese studies and supervised my doctoral research but who, even in his retirement, has continued to provide support, encouragement, and advice as I have worked on this material. Fundamental to the completion of this volume have been the collaboration and support of my colleagues who work in Old Javanese studies, especially those involved in the “Sekar Iniket” project—an ambitious translation project of *kakawin* excerpts envisioned by Professor Zoetmulder, before his death in 1995, as a companion to his *Kalangwan* volume. Tom Hunter, Pak Supomo, Peter Worsley, Kate O'Brien, and Maggie Fletcher have generously allowed me to make use of and quote from their unpublished translations. Kate O'Brien has also allowed me to make use of her forthcoming major study of the *Sutasoma*. Those who work in the often-difficult field of Old Javanese studies will appreciate the value to me of such unparalleled access to so many unpublished *kakawin* sources. Another group of colleagues who have offered ongoing encouragement over many years is the network of scholars working in literary and gender studies in Asia and the Pacific, in Bali studies, and in Old Javanese studies. There are too many to name individually, but the ongoing interest of such a diverse group gave this project a focus when I might otherwise have been tempted to give up. Barbara Watson Andaya, in particular, has offered her unfailing support and encouragement. Special thanks are due to Robert Cribb, who not only read and commented on earlier drafts of some chapters of this book, and always listened patiently to my ideas as this project developed, but also drew the maps. Jo Sbeghen drew my attention to the importance of visual evidence and also helped in a practical way by drawing the illustration of the nymph cradling a love poem on a petal in chapter 1, and providing additional photographic material for inclusion in this book. I am also grateful to Lyn Parker, Margaret Jolly, Roly Sussex, Lene



Pedersen, and Peter Creese for comments on earlier drafts. I Nyoman Darma Putra provided assistance in obtaining photographic material in Bali. For editorial assistance, I am especially grateful to Brian Creese, Peter Creese, and Jennifer Arnold. The School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland provided a supportive and collegial environment; a School Research Grant (2003) supported the illustrative material in this book. Thanks are also due to the helpful staffs of the Pictorial Section of the National Library of Australia in Canberra and the Historical Documentation section of the KITLV (Royal Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) in Leiden. Any errors of course remain my own.

### A Note on Spelling

I have sought to make this book as accessible to as wide a readership as possible by choosing not to use diacritical marks and have taken the somewhat unusual step of giving the *kakawin* texts English-language titles rather than their familiar Old Javanese names. Throughout this book, Indonesian rather than Sanskrit spelling is used for words of Sanskrit origin, except where direct reference to Sanskrit words or titles is made. For example, the *v* of Sanskrit orthography is rendered as *w* in Indonesian languages, and no distinction is made between the different kinds of *s*, *n*, *t*, and *d*. Thus, Sanskrit *Pandava* is transcribed as *Pandawa*, *Shiva* as *Siwa*, *Vishnu* as *Wisnu*, *Krishna* as *Kresna*, and so on.

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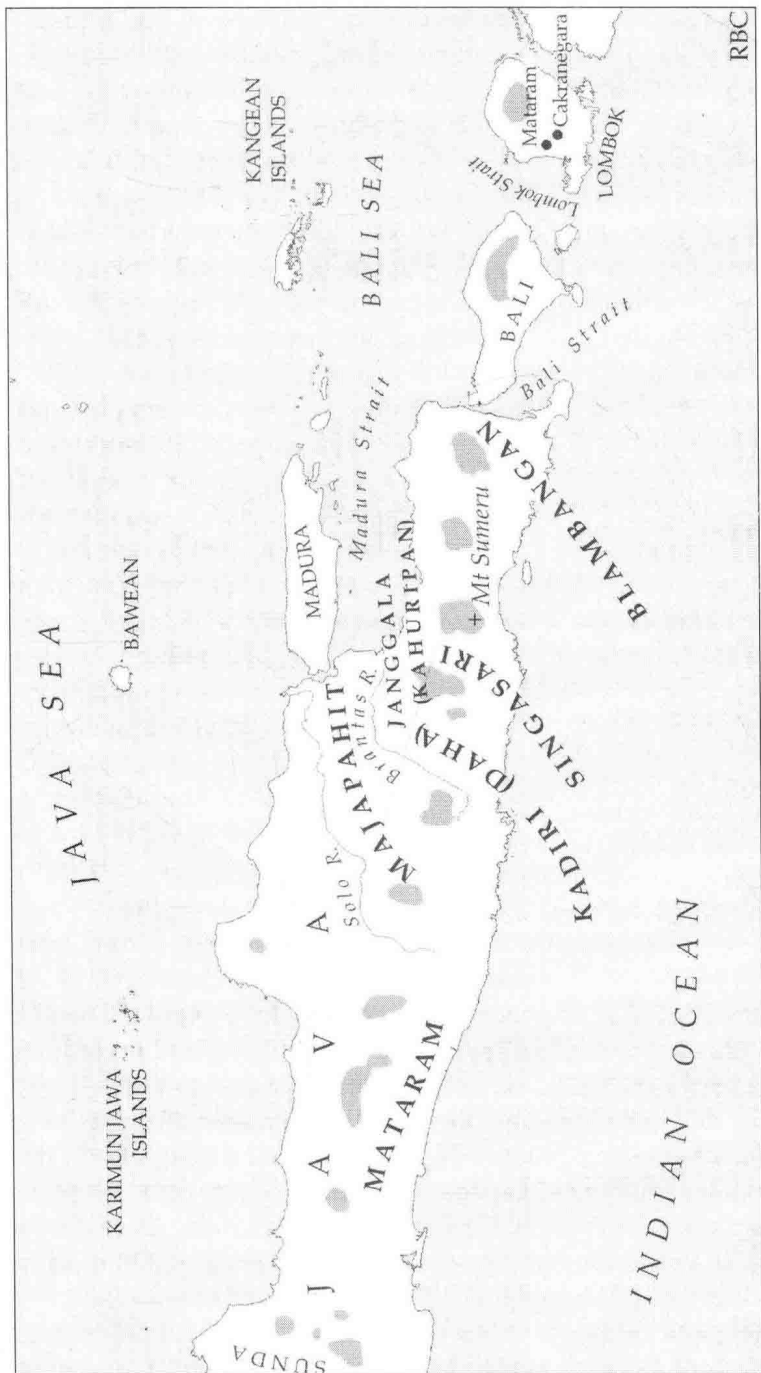
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# Women of the Kakawin World



## The Kakawin World

# 1

## Frameworks

*Suddenly all-enveloping darkness descended  
and an image of the prince emerged  
distinctly in the princess's heart.  
She was shattered, flooded by the surging of lovesickness,  
overwhelmed by feelings of deep emotion.*

[...]

*She then returned to her bedchamber, not  
sleeping a wink the whole night.  
Dejected and sighing, she tossed and turned;  
mystified as to what course she should take,  
she buried her face in the sleeping mat,  
Even the coolness of the mist that gently caressed  
her seemed suddenly scorching.  
Her disdain of love returned as an irresistible attack, so that  
suddenly everything brought her pain.*

(Mpu Panuluh, *Hari's Lineage* 12:4–5, twelfth century, Java)<sup>1</sup>

In a scented pavilion a princess tosses restlessly, overwhelmed by feelings she cannot explain, feelings of both longing and trepidation. These feelings are a prelude to marriage, an entrée to a new world where she will soon exchange the familiarity of her childhood home for the life of a married woman. With marriage her destiny will be tied to a handsome warrior prince, the champion who has defeated all his rivals to win her hand through his courage and prowess. Her love for him will know no bounds, together they will reach the heights of passion, and she will be prepared to follow him even into death.

This romantic, chivalric world that strikes a familiar chord in most of us is nonetheless far removed from Western romantic traditions,



not only geographically, but also because this familiarity is deceptive. For this princess belongs to the *kakawin* world of Java and Bali—a world conjured up through the poetic skills of generations of poets who lived and worked in the Indic courts that flourished in Java and Bali between the ninth and nineteenth centuries. Nor is this princess any ordinary princess. She is an image—a woman no one would ever meet in reality, but one who is nonetheless representative of the ideals of the society that created and perpetuated her. Real or imaginary? Fact or fiction? Or a little of both? It is these issues that this book sets out to explore.

This study draws on the epic *kakawin* poetry tradition of Java and Bali to examine representations of women and sexuality and the institutions of courtship and marriage in the Indic courts of Java and Bali.<sup>2</sup> Indic courts, imbued with centuries of cultural interchange with Indian, Sanskrit traditions, flourished in pre-Islamic Java between the seventh and fifteenth centuries, and from the ninth century until the late nineteenth century in Bali, where the Balinese courts maintained the centuries-old cultural and religious traditions they had shared with the Javanese before the coming of Islam. For more than one thousand years these royal courts were major centers of patronage of the arts, and the corpus of court-sponsored epic *kakawin* works that has survived therefore provides an ongoing literary testimony to the cultural and social concerns of court society in Java and Bali from the time of its earliest recorded history until its demise at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

*Kakawin* are not dry historical documents but works of literary art—poems in which individual poets tried to capture the essence of aesthetic pleasure in beautiful words through the telling of tales of exceptional women and men. The major thematic concerns of *kakawin* poetry are war—to which little attention is given in this book—and love and marriage. Every *kakawin* can be read for the sheer pleasure of its story and its language. But these poems are also a rich and untapped resource for the study of the pivotal social institution of marriage in Java and Bali in premodern times.

This study sets out to explore the *kakawin* corpus as a source for the cultural and social history of the Indic courts, and to consider gender within the texts, not only because *kakawin* texts lend themselves well to this purpose, but also because such a study has never