

JAPANESE AUTOBIOGRAPHY – Postclassical period

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NIKKI (Diary)

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Overview: The Classical Age of Japanese Culture

Japan during the Heian period (ca 800-1200) has long been heralded as a Golden Age of classical civilization. Its wide range of literary, artistic, and artisanal products are indelibly associated with courtly style, elegance, aristocratic refinement, and exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. Overall, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, nuance, and elegant understatement. This in part reflects the fact that a number of their treasured products are the work of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court.

Aside from literary pursuits, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative activities— music and dance, painting, calligraphy, textile design, and so forth. Much of this work reflects the influence of Chinese prototypes and models— part of the centuries-long process of absorbing the language, political institutions, and arts of China. A key inspiration emerged from the Chinese-based Buddhist sects that took root among the Japanese elites and became widely patronized. This led to the eventual mastery of Buddhist religious arts— sculpture, painting, ritual objects, sutra copying, and of course architecture.

In short, Heian culture, in its stunning variety, would become an enduring civilizational legacy, inspiring artists, writers, and craftsmen over the centuries. A fundamental aspect of Japanese national identity, to the present day, can be said to tap into Heian classical roots.

Heian Literature and the Role of *Nikki*

Heian literature both mirrored and celebrated the world of the court aristocracy. Courtly sensibility and bearing were highly valued, and these would be channeled chiefly through poetry and lyrical expression. Yet there was a broader interest in expressing one's personal voice, and producing narrative accounts of one's experiences, recollections, and musings became standard practice among the courtier class. Such accounts, though, would be subject to Heian codes of propriety and restraint, which placed certain constraints on what we might regard as 'freedom of self-expression.'

Diary literature (*nikkibungaku*) has long been a fixture of the Japanese canon. And as with other genres, the role of Chinese models and influences must be acknowledged.

Heian courtiers were avid diarists. In their role as court officials burdened with various administrative duties, the males were expected to keep a relatively factual record of daily events, written in the business-like *kanbun* genre of Chinese-style narrative. Court women, on the other hand, were free to express themselves in their 'native language' and with a more explicitly personal voice than was the case with their male counterparts. And they collectively succeeded in crafting a style that adhered to aristocratic conventions while achieving a high level of literary excellence.

Of the many examples of Heian diaries written with a clear literary purpose, three stand out— *The Tosa Diary* (Tosanikki, 930) by Ki no Tsurayuki; *The Gossamer Journal* (Kagerōnikki, 974) by the mother of Fujiwara no Michitsuna, and the *Diary of Lady Murasaki* (MurasakiShikibunikki, 1010).

The Tosa Diary

This is the work of one of the great Heian court poets, Ki no Tsurayuki— the chief compiler of Japan’s first Imperial waka anthology, the *Kokinshū* (905). Interestingly, Tsurayuki’s account of the return voyage to Kyoto from his governorship in the province of Tosa adopts the fictive voice of a woman who was part of the ship’s company. Incorporating some sixty poems attributed to many of the passengers, which provide a lively verse counterpoint to the daily record of the two-month voyage, the diarist pays particular attention to one of the passengers— the mother of a child who had died in the provinces.

12th month, 27th day: During the bustle of departure. . . one member of the party had looked on in silence, thinking of a little girl, born in the capital, who had died suddenly in the province. It ought to have been a cause of joy to be setting out toward the city, but the parent was lost in grief for the absent child. The others were deeply sympathetic. A certain person wrote a poem and brought it out:

At long last, I think,
We head toward the capital
And yet this sadness,
Because of one among us
Who will not be going home [Based on McCullough, CJP 75-76]

Tsurayuki’s fictive diary thus plays on the joy and anticipation of return to the capital, juxtaposed against the grieving parent and the solicitude of her fellow travelers. Yet it incorporates very mundane concerns as well— for instance, the scene that greeted the diarist upon returning home: “When we reached the house and entered the gate, the disrepair that greeted us was terrible. . . The sheer desolation of the scene evoked exclamations of grief and despair.”

Overall, though, Tsurayuki’s *Tosa Diary* is noteworthy for its many poems, which run the gamut from the halting work of children who were aboard the ship to highly polished verse, together with critical commentary. The density of poetic content and criticism suggests that Tsurayuki’s underlying aim was to have his ‘diary’ serve as a handbook of poetic style and technique.

Moreover, the *Tosa Diary* is recognized as the pioneering work of an important subgenre of personal narrative— the travel diary (*kikōnikki*). Japanese poets often took to the road, and their travels would inevitably inspire poetic production along the way. In fact, it could be argued that the very purpose of travel, in some cases, was to inspire fresh new avenues of poetic production. Be that as it may, the poetically-dense travel diary has long been a fixture of the Japanese literary canon.

The Gossamer Journal

One of the most remarkable works of Heian prose is the *Gossamer Journal* (*Kagerōnikki*, 974), an account of a woman’s loveless marriage to a high-ranking courtier, Fujiwara Kaneie. The diarist/ wife is known to us only as the mother of Michitsuna, in keeping with the practice of referring to court women by reference to a male relative. Praised as a great beauty, she was regarded as a poet of the first magnitude. Her ‘journal,’ which bears a closer resemblance to personal reminiscence, comprises episodes written over a span of twenty years (954-74). These episodes are interspersed with lively and often acerbic poetic jousting between the peevish wife and her philandering husband. Overall, the journal affords a moving account of domestic tedium, jealousy, melancholia, and righteous indignation that is stunningly contemporary in its feel.

[956] So the days went by. Kaneie’s visits did not cease entirely, but it was impossible for me to feel at ease with him, and our relations grew more and more strained. There was even a time when he turned around and left, declaring himself vanquished by my sulkiness. . . And now that his affections had strayed, he removed his belongings from my house. [CJP 113-14]

[966] Although this apparently secure marriage had lasted eleven or twelve years, I had lived in constant misery, tormented day and night by the inferiority of my position. . . With no one to order repairs and look after things, my house and its environs had become more and more dilapidated,

and it upset me that Kaneie should come and go blithely in such a place, without seeming to care whether its condition bothered me or not. [CJP 142-43]

Despite the evidence of male prerogative and the relatively confined circumstance of courtier wives, the *Gossamer* diarist, together with the poet Komachi, belie the pernicious stereotype of eternally meek, compliant Japanese womanhood. Indeed, through her frank and at times scathing remarks, she exacts a certain literary revenge on her boorish, uncouth husband. Yet the diarist's melancholic and brooding voice dominates the work as a whole and is recapitulated in the final entry for the year 968:

So time passes, but the advent of a new year brings no joy to one who is sunk in grief, her life far from what she would have desired. When I reflect on the perpetual uncertainty in which I exist, it seems to me that this has been the journal of a woman whose fortunes are as evanescent as the gossamer shimmer of a heat wave in the sky. [CJP 155]

Something akin to the *Gossamer* diarist's anxieties and insecurities would mark the diary of MurasakiShikibu.

Diary of Lady Murasaki

What we know of the otherwise anonymous author of *The Tale of Genji* is largely based on her diary, which she composed around the year 1010. Her personal accounts of life in the Heian court, with a focus on the comings and goings of her great patron Fujiwara no Michinaga, are immediately reminiscent of the writings of SeiShônagon. In fact, these two court ladies were literary rivals with evidently scant regard for one another. Murasaki remarks as follows:

SeiShônagon is dreadfully conceited and thinks herself so clever. . . Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end.

But the diarist then proceeds to become moody and dispirited:

And so it is that I criticize others [such as Shônagon], yet here is one who has survived thus far without having achieved anything of note. I have nothing to look forward to in the future that might afford the slightest consolation. . . Everything conspires to make me unhappy. [Based on Shirane, TjL 449, 452]

Murasaki's melancholia recalls that of the *Gossamer* diarist. Both of them are unusually candid in their glum self-assessment. Yet for the author of *The Tale of Genji* to lament her failure to achieve anything of note strikes one as ironic in the extreme.

As the above examples attest, Heian diaries provide a running commentary upon events and experiences, emotions and musings. They combine frank self-expression, reflective commentary, poetic counterpoint, and fictional license. Bordering the domains of fiction (*monogatari*) and essay (*zuihitsu*), and a congenial vehicle for poetic expression, the classical diary is anything but a self-contained genre but rather points to the integrated quality of creative expression among the Japanese court aristocracy. Notwithstanding Murasaki's lament, the achievement of women writers across the literary spectrum is among the chief legacies of Heian culture.

Readings

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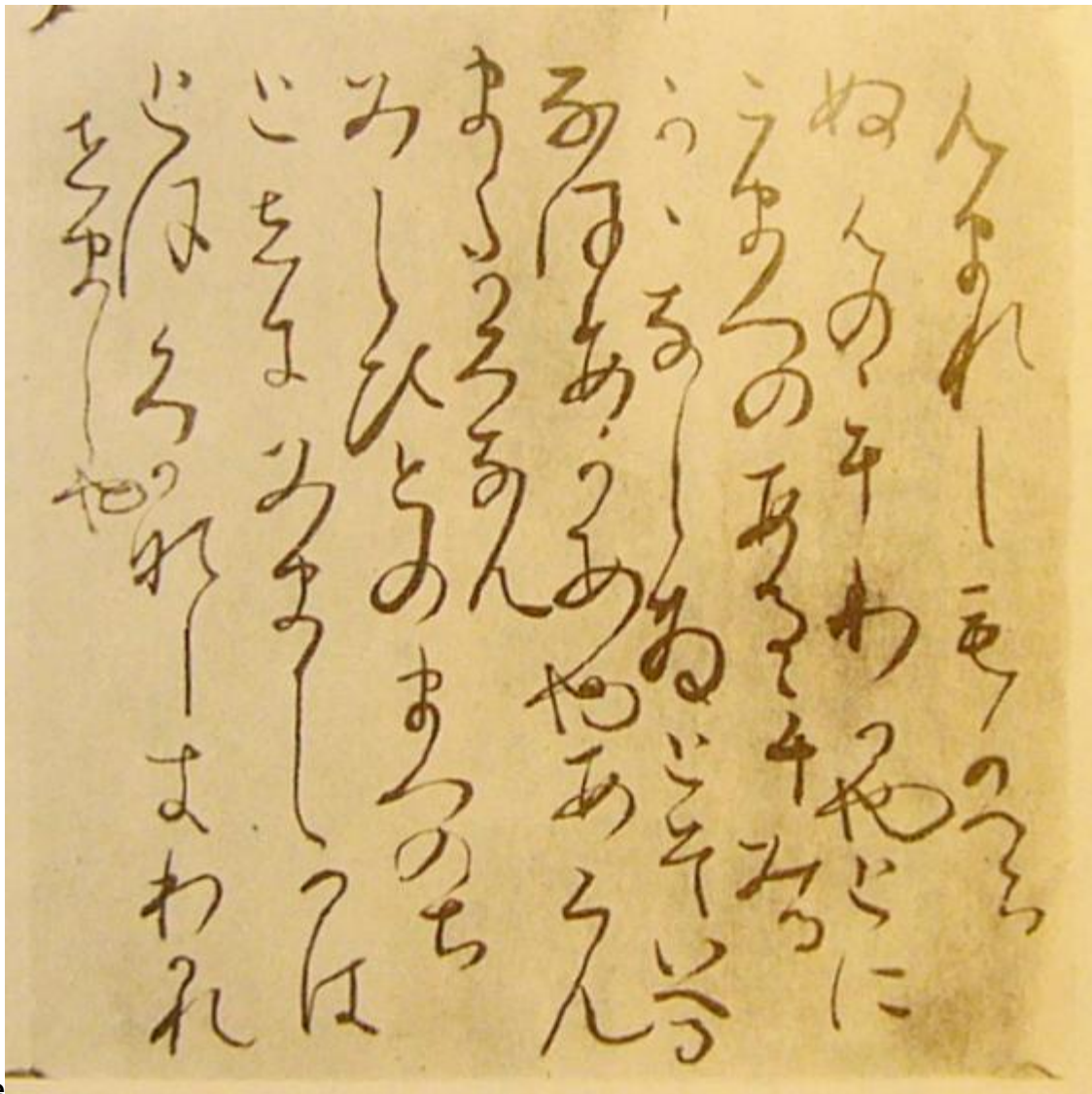
Discussion Questions and Topics

Compare the role of poetry and poetic expression in the three diary examples.

Does Tsurayuki's adoption of a female persona result in a convincing evocation of a woman's perspective, or is the persona transparently fictional? What might be gained from such a strategy?

Compare the perspective of a courtier wife living in her own household (*Gossamer* diarist) with that of a serving lady within the court (Murasaki).

What most appeals to you about these diaries? What strikes you as disappointing or difficult to grasp?



Image

Detail from Fujiwara Teika's early 13th-century transcription of Tsurayuki's *Tosa Nikki*. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Part II : Japanese Autobiography- Classical Period

Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyō*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidō*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujō*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Nikki*

The Heian literary legacy was much in evidence during the medieval period. Poetry and lyrical expression remained prominent, but the preëminence of courtly styles and conventions gave way to more austere and introspective modes of expression, reflecting the new social and political order. The dominance of the samurai class gave rise to the production of warrior tales and legends, with the epic *Tale of the Heike* (early 13th century) ultimately rivaling the *Tale of Genji* as a national classic.

While *waka*-centered court poetry remained the dominant literary mode, new forms— in particular, linked verse— reflected the temper of the times. A strongly Buddhist taste for meditative reflection and solemnity developed, and it would be brilliantly evoked in the uniquely lyrical and other-worldly Noh drama. Hence, Heian and medieval literature— spanning eight centuries of Japan's cultural history— constitute a unique 'yin-yang' complementarity that reflects the complex interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As for medieval diary literature: In line with the classical Heian diaries, the major texts are the work of women in the imperial aristocracy. Reflecting the ambiguous borders of personal narrative genre categories, this work combines elements of diary and memoir, with the all-but-obligatory poetic content and lyrical sentiment.

Three works are particularly noteworthy. Two are by aristocratic women, Lady Nijō and the Nun Abutsu, who relate very different life experiences. The third is a poetically-dense travel diary by an anonymous male courtier.

The Confessions of Lady Nijō

Spanning forty-five years in the life of a woman of high rank, *The Confessions of Lady Nijō* (Towazugatari, ca 1310) recounts the unlikely vicissitudes and intimate affairs that ensued from her having been orphaned as a girl and hence deprived of parental support. What amounts to an intimate autobiography ends with the lady renouncing the world and taking Buddhist vows.

Written retrospectively, these 'confessions' hardly qualify as a diary in the conventional sense, but the author's diary-like attention to the details of everyday life provides a convincingly authentic glimpse into her emotional makeup. The affinity here with the personal reflections of the mid-Heian *Gossamer* diarist is noteworthy.

In particular, Lady Nijō speaks openly of her initiation into the world of amorous relations:

His Majesty's behavior that night was callous. I think my thin robes must have ripped rather badly, but he did as he pleased with me. I hated being alive, hated even the dawn moon. . .

Yet her initial revulsion quickly gives way to a more willing acquiescence:

What tutelage might have been responsible for the sudden attraction I felt as I looked at His Majesty standing there in a red-lined green-banded hunting robe, a lavender inner robe, and a pair of bound-patterned baggy trousers? I marvel at the complexity of a woman's heart. [CJP 297]

Although one is unable to fully appreciate the precise appeal of the lavishly-described courtly fashions, it bears noting that Lady Nijō likens her romantic entanglements to the accounts of Prince Genji and his lovers, recalling MurasakiShikibu's now three hundred year-old classic of courtly romance. In the course of things, she speaks candidly of her willing participation in her romantic affairs, one of which resulted in a pregnancy and the subsequent death of her infant son. Grief-stricken, Lady Nijō reflects upon the unremitting travails of human existence and imagines abandoning the world of attachment and desire by becoming a nun. This in effect would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of the world beyond the confines of the court we learn next to nothing.

The Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon

A roughly contemporaneous work, *The Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon* (Izayoi Nikki, 1279-80) by the nun Abutsu (1220-83), bears a closer resemblance to Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* of the early Heian period. Both are travel diaries (*kikōnikki*) in which poetry is predominant. Abutsu, who had been raised in the imperial court, belonged to one of its chief poetic lineages and was herself a noted *waka* poet. In fact, her journal was written on the occasion of a trip to Kamakura for the express purpose of petitioning the shogunal authorities regarding the disposition of her estate. The precise legal details are beside the point of the journal, whose underlying purpose is utterly clear— to exalt the 'Way of Poetry' in the face of its evident decline and to defend her own poetic faction against rival claims.

In short, the journey to Kamakura served as a 'poetic occasion' par excellence, yielding a trove of *waka* poetry and reverential praise for Japan as a divinely-inspired poetic realm:

It seemed to me that there might be those who regarded the art of poetry as lacking in seriousness, as mere frivolous amusement. But our wise men have told us that this art has helped to regulate society and to calm unrest in the Land of the Rising Sun from time immemorial. . . [Based on CJP 340]

Beginning her journal account by thus invoking the 8th-century *Kojiki* account of Japan's mythic origins, Abutsu goes on to defend the claims of the Mikohidari poetic lineage, to which she belongs. What ensues is a record of the journey itself, with each stop along the way occasioning the obligatory *waka* and a host of references to the classical poetic tradition— the *Kokinshū* anthology, the *Tales of Ise*, and medieval poets such as Saigyō and Teika. What is more, Abutsu happily notes the delivery of poetic parcels from the capital, which elicit a joyous response.

Abutsu's account contains no mention of the actual legal proceedings in Kamakura and its disposition. Rather, it concludes with a long, 150-line poem (*chōka*) that essentially presents her case in alternating five- and seven-syllable poetic lines. This remarkable poetic deposition reduces to the following four lines:

With no concern for myself
I trust the government. . .
If only it will reach a verdict
Without delay [CJP 374-375]

Although the evidence is unclear, Abutsu appears to have died in Kamakura while awaiting the shogunal verdict. Thankfully, her literary record survives.

A Journey to the East

A somewhat earlier account of a trip to Kamakura is the work of an anonymous courtier with obvious poetic credentials. *A Journey to the East* (Tôkankikô, ca 1242) predates Abutsu's work by almost forty years. But unlike her own explicit rationale for the trip, this anonymous diarist provides no reason for leaving the capital— other than his vague sense of anxiety and restlessness as he approaches his fiftieth year.

As though compelled to cite every possible poetic inspiration— both Japanese *and* Chinese— the diarist provides a dense poetic framework for his journey, making it clear that he is an accomplished court poet imbued with a lyrical spirit. But unlike Abutsu, whose reason for making the trip is made explicit, this gentleman leaves this to our imagination. Yet both diarists share the same destination and follow the same itinerary, which is rich with poetic and other literary associations.

Foreshadowing the celebrated travel diaries of Matsuo Bashô by well over four hundred years, *A Journey to the East* pays homage to the great poet Saigyô, who left a verse record of places visited by this more recent traveler. The diarist invokes the trope of 'the loneliness of travel,' a lyrical convention associated with one's departure from Kyoto. And he expresses the Buddhistic sentiment of *mujô*— the evanescence of all things.

Yet despite his 'political correctness' as a court poet, the diarist is rather more interested than Abutsu in observing and depicting actual scenes he encounters along the way. For instance, he notes that Mount Fuji's beauty is "even greater than in pictures." Curiously, perhaps, he is more moved by the spectacle of the adjacent marshlands, which appear to strike a responsive chord:

Sky and water merge, suffused with the reflected green of the mountains. Reed-cutters pole small boats here and there, and huge flocks of waterfowl utter raucous cries.

A view of the coast far to the south is described as follows:

The surface of the sea appeared as an immense expanse of clouded, hazy waves with no island to obstruct the view. . . . Wherever the eye ranges, the scene is lonely. Wavering columns of smoke rise from salt-burners' huts on the plain, and a shore wind moans in the pine trees. . . .
[CJP 440]

As travel diaries, *The Sixteenth Night Moon* and *Journey to the East* owe a debt to precursors such as Tsurayuki's early-Heian *Tosa Diary*. Yet one struggles to identify a sense of interiority, of palpable selfhood in these works. Rather, we must recognize the loftier purpose of poetic expression and dedication, compared to which the 'mere' portrayal of one's mundane personal concerns pales in comparison.

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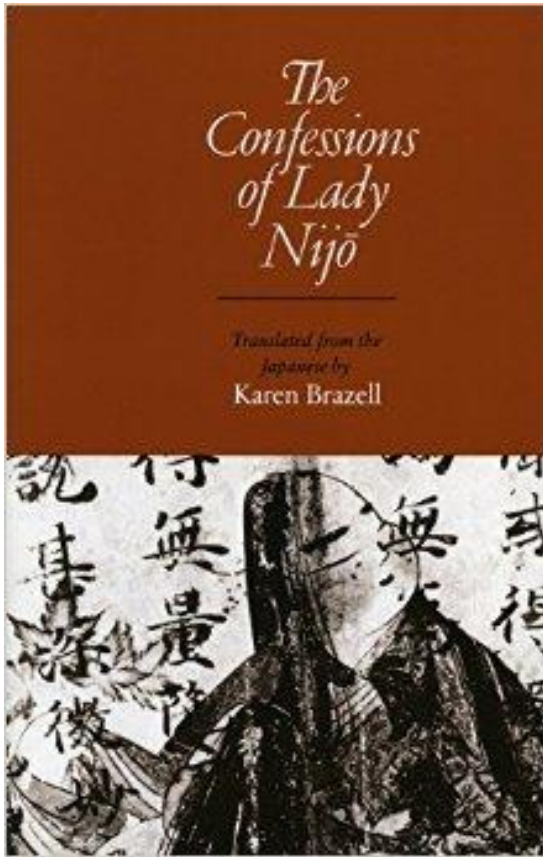
Discussion Questions and Topics

How do our medieval examples compare with the classical Heian diaries? What evidence is there of the samurai-based political and social order? What sort of society does this appear to be?

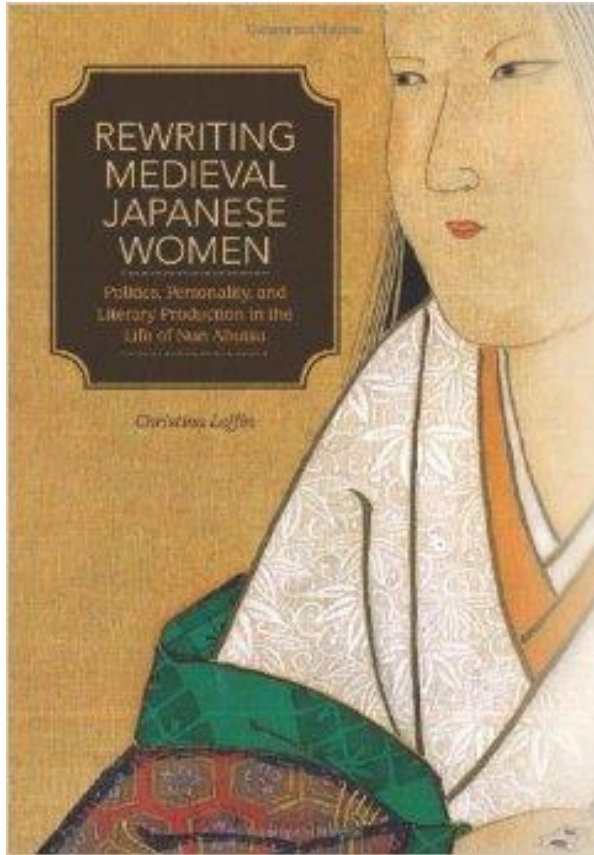
Is there anything distinctive about the day-to-day events recorded in the diaries? What of the poetry, which is so prominent in these works? Do they possess any real substance apart from the poetic content?

What do you regard as the most revealing glimpses of individuals and their private lives? What appears especially 'opaque' and esoteric?

Images



English translation by Karen Brazell of Lady Nijō's *Towazugatari*. Source: Amazon.com



Christina Laffin's study of the life and writings of Nun Abutsu. Source: University of Hawaii Press.