

# JAPANESE FICTION – PostClassical Period

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

## **MONOGATARI (Fiction)**

### **Contents**

*Part I : Classical Period*

*Part II : Medieval Period*

### **Part I : Classical Period**

#### **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. And the city of Kyoto, the site of the Heian imperial capital, continues to serve as the nation's cultural mecca.

#### **Heian Literature and the Role of *Monogatari***

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. Poetry in the formal *waka* style (31 syllables) became the orthodox standard, and it served as a key mode of communication. Heian courtiers also indulged themselves in a variety of personal writing— chiefly, diary (*nikki*) and essay (*zuihitsu*).

However, the pinnacle of Heian literature— *The Tale of Genji*— is a work of fiction, a *monogatari*. As with so many other cultural products, Heian fiction bore the mark of Chinese literary precursors. And as was the case with Heian prose narrative in general, poetry would figure prominently. Furthermore, these narrative works were rendered in an artful calligraphy hand and were typically accompanied by pictorial illustrations that helped enhance the reading experience.

The *monogatari* genre, which was oriented around romantic fiction but included historical and personal elements as well, developed during the ninth century, early in the Heian period. As with poetry, relatively crude early examples became increasingly sophisticated, culminating in Murasaki's crowning achievement. The first noteworthy *monogatari* romance is the anonymous *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketorimonogatari*, ca 880).

### ***Tale of the Bamboo Cutter***

This early Heian romance begins with the account of a miraculous discovery:

Once upon a time, there was an old bamboo cutter who went into the mountains and fields to cut bamboo and put the stalks to various uses. . . It came to pass that one stalk of bamboo shone at the base. Puzzled, the old man noticed that the light came from its interior. Upon closer inspections, he saw a dainty little girl, just three inches tall, sitting inside. [Based on McCullough, CJP 28-29]

Essentially an extended folk tale, the story goes on to relate how the bamboo cutter and his wife raise the tiny girl, who quickly grows into a stunningly beautiful woman named Kaguyahime. What ensues is a conventional romantic narrative recounting the vain attempts of her many suitors to woo the young beauty. Eventually, Kaguyahime assumes her true identity as a moon maiden and is escorted back to her celestial home by lunar emissaries cloaked in garments of incomparable beauty.

The heavenly beings had brought with them a box that contained a heavenly feathered robe. They dressed Kaguyahime in the robe and had her drink an elixir of immortality. She then entered the celestial carriage and soared into the heavens. [Based on CJP 36-37]

Subsequent *monogatari* would eschew such supernatural elements and center instead on the 'real' world of courtly romance. This line of development would culminate in MurasakiShikibu's masterpiece of Heian fiction.

### ***The Tale of Genji***

The 'alpha' of Japanese literature and the epitome of nearly two centuries of Heian courtly writing, *The Tale of Genji* both embodies and instantiates classical Japanese aesthetics, style, and literary virtuosity. It is arguably the first great novel of world literature. Although Lady Murasaki was influenced by earlier romantic tales, her chief inspiration was the anonymous mid-tenth century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). While 'technically' a *monogatari*, the work is in effect an anthology of *waka* by the great Heian court poet Ariwara no Narihira, distributed among 125 brief narrative episodes detailing the exploits of 'a certain man' (*aruotoko*), understood to be Narihira. The figure of this 'certain man' would emerge as the prototype for Murasaki's Prince Genji.

Commencing with the formulaic phrase *Izure no ontokinika* ('once upon a time'), *The Tale of Genji* comprises fifty-four chapters that evoke the world of Heian court society. A densely lyrical novel, *Genji* includes a thousand poems, which constitute a virtual anthology of court poetry.

How, then, to do justice to a work of such magnitude? First, the title is significant. Lady Murasaki has elevated one individual— Genji, the 'Shining Prince'— as a paragon who epitomizes the ideals of noble birth, elegant demeanor, poetic refinement, and exquisite sensitivity. And much as our view of Victorian London is filtered through the novels of Charles Dickens, Murasaki has created a convincingly realistic representation of a certain time and place.

The novel's romantic paragon is cast in a distinctly feminized matter, as the following passages make evident:

Genji. . . was leaning against an armrest, attired in an informal cloak that was draped with deliberate negligence over some soft white inner robes, its cords untied; and his beauty in the lamplight made it tempting to think of him as a woman. To see him was to sense the difficulty of choosing a woman who could be completely worthy of him, even if she were the highest of the high.

. . .

Everyone felt drawn to Genji, even strangers who barely caught a glimpse of him. Of those who beheld his radiant countenance, not one well-born father but longed to send him his precious

daughter, not one humble man with a presentable sister but hoped to have her serve him, in whatever menial capacity. . .

Tears of deep emotion filled Genji's own eyes as he pondered the many implications of human ephemerality, but they did not mar the beauty and elegance of his appearance. . .  
[McCullough, *Genji and Heike* 44, 64, 151]

With an eye to the Chinese cosmological pairing of *yang* (the assertive, active male principle) and *yin* (the yielding, passive female principle), Murasaki cast her work as a '*yin*' novel, set in private interior spaces and animated not so much by dramatic encounters and dynamic plot turns as the ebb and flow of sentiment, reflection, and a wistful awareness of the passage of time. It juxtaposes resplendent displays of beauty and style (of which Prince Genji is the standard-bearer) and a depth of feeling and poignancy of longing. What may be termed Genji's elegant passivity stands in stark contrast to the corrosive emotions of certain women— for instance, the spurned Rokujō Lady and her fits of jealous rage— that transform into supernatural agents of lethal revenge.

The novel's distinctive aura of longing centers on Genji's quest for his mother, the Kiritsubo Lady, who died when he was a young boy. And much of its plot recounts relationships with women who remind Genji of his mother and hence serve as surrogates and substitute figures. The poignancy recalls what many regard as the novel's defining quality— *mono no aware*, the capacity to be moved by the beauty and pathos of existence. This quality, which relates to the Buddhistic notion of ephemerality and a corollary aesthetics of transience, suffuses the novel from start to finish.

The singular 'representative man' of the Heian court, Genji is perfectly formed, all but divine in certain respects. Yet he is deeply flawed and vulnerable. Although portrayed in many scenes as transcending the mortal realm, Genji remains exquisitely sensitive to the passage of time and is prone to a melancholy that finds expression in lyrical soliloquy and poetry. In short, Murasaki's paragon is a mortal human being. Following a curiously veiled account of his death, the novel's concluding ten chapters turn to an account of two Genji-esque courtiers— Kaoru and Niou— who reconstitute the world of the Shining Prince through their respective romantic encounters.

Little is known, though much is speculated, concerning the composition of *Genji*, the sequencing of its chapters, and the way it circulated among the Kyoto aristocracy a thousand years ago. Early on the text was rendered as an illustrated picture scroll (*emaki*), to be read aloud and enjoyed for both its pictorial and literary artistry.

It is abundantly clear that Japanese culture would thereafter become a repository for Genji-inspired variants and retellings. The work has inspired medieval Noh drama, kabuki and puppet theater adaptations, modern-day films, anime, and pop culture spin-offs of every description. Indeed, the Genji 'brand name' has helped elevate the Heian era to an iconic status, in the absence of any actual remnants of this golden age of Japanese aristocratic civilization.

Murasaki's novel, all but unreadable in the original language, has been rendered into modern Japanese by a number of literary figures powerfully drawn to its fictional world— most notably Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, who produced no less than three complete renderings. And there are three complete English translations. Although quite daunting in its narrative complexity, the novel's qualities of mind, heart, and spirit have become an integral part of the Japanese cultural legacy. And if there is such a thing as a Japanese national identity, or cultural memory, Genji and his world have surely earned a place of honor.

## Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

Keene, Donald, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia, 1988)

Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990) [Abbreviated CJP]

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Genji and Heike: Selections From The Tale of Genji and The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford, 1994)

Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Knopf, 1964)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (Columbia, 2007)

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

## Discussion Questions and Topics

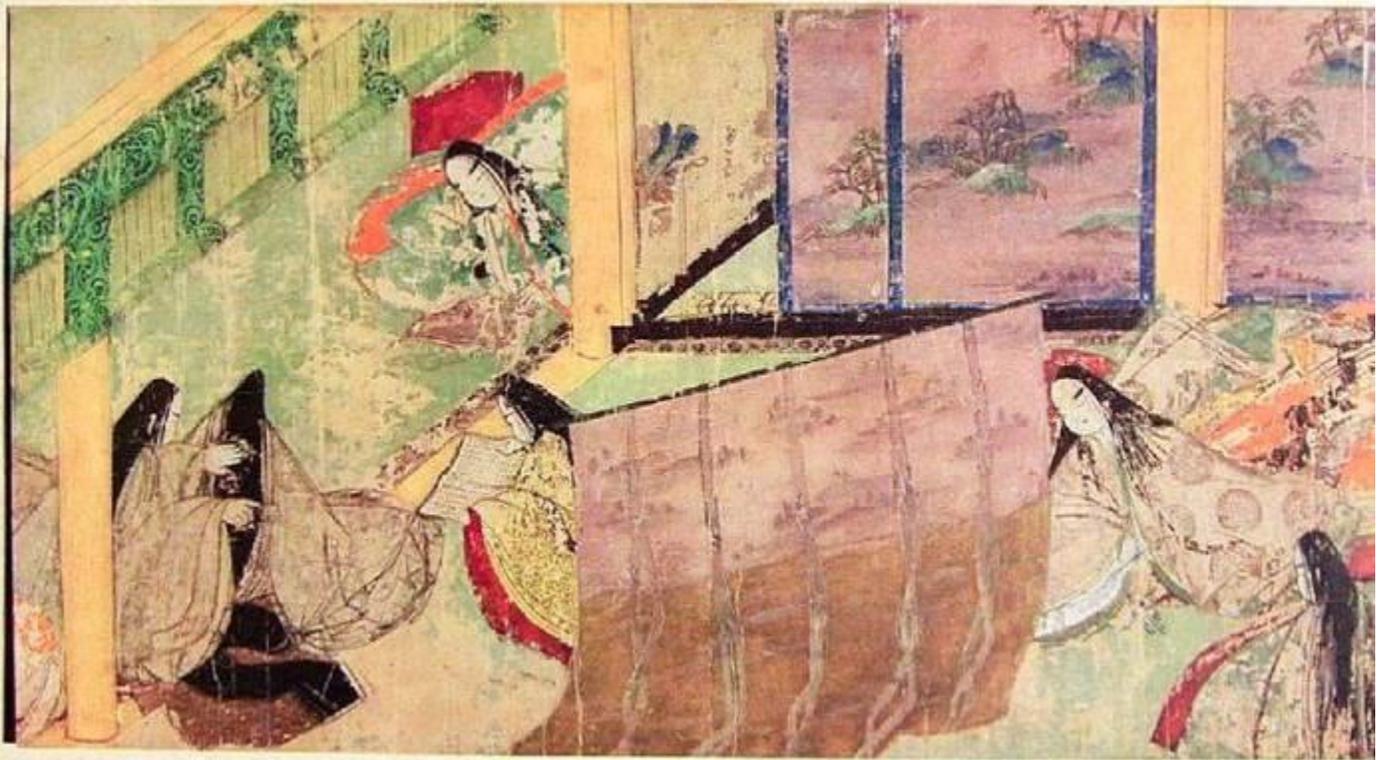
*The Tale of Genji* can be read as both reflecting the unique lifestyles and practices of the Heian court, and the more universal qualities of human interaction and romantic sensibility. Give thought to how these two 'readings' intersect and interrelate.

Many have noted Prince Genji's androgynous persona and the overall 'feminine' aura of Murasaki's novel. What might account for this quality? Is Murasaki's work ultimately a 'feminist' response to what was a society dominated by male power and privilege?

How might one argue for and against claims regarding certain works of literature, such as *The Tale of Genji*, as having earned a place in a nation's 'cultural legacy.' In view of our increasingly globalized and integrated world, what significance should we give to the very notion of 'cultural legacy'?

Similarly, how might works of art and literature be considered to reflect and mold 'national identity'? Must we have actually read the work in question in order to internalize a sense of its cultural value? For that matter, does such 'traditionalist' thinking have a place in today's world?

## Images



Detail from the *Genjimonogatariemaki* (picture scroll) of the mid-twelfth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



MurasakiShikibu as depicted in an 1880 woodblock print by Hiroshige III.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Image taken from the 1951 film version of *The Tale of Genji* directed by Yoshimura Kôzaburô. Source: Wikimedia Commons

## Part II : Medieval 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 *Monogatari*

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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 the place of *monogatari* per se in the larger medieval literary context, it both reflected the influence of Heian fiction and the radically different world of the samurai and accounts— both factual and legendary— of their exploits and intrigues.

Historically speaking, the medieval era was ushered in with the founding, in 1192, of a Shogunal center in Kamakura. It was in the middle of the twelfth century when two powerful warrior clans— the Minamoto and Taira— became embroiled in a decades-long rivalry that culminated in a series of battles ending in 1185. The Taira forces had the upper hand but were eventually vanquished by the Minamoto, led by Yoritomo and his half-brother Yoshitsune. The so-called '*Gempei Wars*,' lasting some thirty years, were marked by battlefield heroics, political intrigues, and social turmoil. These events would be recounted in *The Tale of the Heike*, Japan's great warrior epic and second only to *Genji* as a certified national treasure. It was the victorious Yoritomo who essentially crowned himself, in 1192, as Shogun and established his clan as hereditary claimants to the newly-established shogunal office.

Warrior-centered *monogatari* would subsequently be a fixture of medieval fiction and, as with the *Genji*-centered Heian *monogatari*, they would inspire literary and artistic production to the present day.

### *Heike Monogatari* and the Warrior Myth

If the *Tale of Genji* represents the *yin* pole of a feminized Japanese persona, the *Tale of the Heike* stands as its *yang* counterpart, centering on samurai masculinity and prowess. An anonymous work with a complex textual history, *Heike monogatari* recounts a series of dramatic episodes that mark the climax of the *Gempei* conflict. But despite its basis in historical actuality, the work is in effect a Buddhist parable, whose theme

resounds at the very outset: *Gionshōja no kane no koe, shogyōmujō no hibikiari*— ‘The sound of the GionShōja bell echoes the impermanence of all things.’

The central theme of *mujō*— impermanence— is then further refined: ‘The proud do not endure; they are like a dream on a spring night. The mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.’ Thus, the tragic fate of the once-proud Taira clan is sealed at the very outset in this incantatory, almost scriptural pronouncement. And the karmic blame for the Taira’s tragic fate is laid at the feet of the clan chief, Kiyomori, whose outrageous behavior and hubris were met with divine retribution visited upon the entire clan.

If *Genji* is marked by a pathos of longing that plays upon courtly sentiment and romantic sensibilities, *Heike* is equally marked by a tragic pathos— the decline and fall of a once-proud family. Its emblematic figures— Yoshitsune, Yoshinaka, and Atsumori, among others— are endowed with a certain ‘nobility of failure,’ to cite the title of Ivan Morris’s illuminating study of Japan’s pantheon of failed heroes.

Warrior exploits— and there are many— constitute a first order of dramatic narrative in the *Heike*. The following is a representative episode:

[Jōmyō] let fly a fast and furious barrage. . . killing twelve men instantly and wounding eleven others. . . He then moved down five enemies with his spear and was engaging a sixth when the blade snapped in the middle. He abandoned the weapon and fought with his sword. Hard-pressed by a host of adversaries, he struck out in every direction, employing zigzag, interlacing, crosswise, dragonfly reverse, and waterwheel maneuvers. He cut down eight men on the spot, and struck the helmet of the ninth such a mighty blow that the sword snapped at the hilt rivet. . . [Based on McCullough, *Genji and Heike* 311]

Contrary to one’s expectation, however, the warriors are not all men, as the following account dramatically illustrates:

Yoshinaka had brought two female attendants, Tomoe and Yamabuki, with him. . . Tomoe was the more beautiful of the two. . . She was also a remarkably strong archer, and with a sword she was a warrior equal to a thousand. . . When there was a battle to be fought, Yoshinaka sent her out to act as his first captain. . .

As she sat there, thirty horsemen came into view, led by OndaMoroshige, a man famous in Musashi Province for his prodigious strength. Tomoe galloped in among them. She rode up alongside Moroshige, seized him in a powerful grip, and pulled him down against the pommel of her saddle. Holding him motionless, she twisted off his head and threw it away. . . [Based on *Genji and Heike* 378, 380]

One of the most affecting episodes in *Heike monogatari* concerns the sorry fate of Atsumori, an embattled Taira youth who finds himself no match for the great Minamoto warrior Kumagai. Although moved by the lad’s beauty and noble bearing, Kumagai is obliged to take his head as a trophy. Discovering that Atsumori had gone into battle carrying only a flute in a brocade bag, Kumagai is deeply remorseful at this sad turn of events, and he resolves to enter the priesthood and pray for the repose of Atsumori’s spirit. In other words, *Heike* is not merely a ‘warrior epic’ but presents a nuanced portrayal of character as well. And here the work can be said to pay homage to *Genji*.

As with *The Tale of Genji*, which was one of many Heian *monogatari*, *The Tale of the Heike* belongs to the medieval genre of *gunkimonogatari*— warrior accounts. Such works were based on historical conflicts and featured heavily dramatized scenes of battle. The *Heike* tales would serve as the model for subsequent works in this genre.

For instance, there is the ironically-titled *Taiheiki* (A Chronicle of the Great Peace; anonymous, late 14<sup>th</sup> century)— an epic account of the prolonged conflict that witnessed the overthrow of the Kamakura Shogunate in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. Interweaving gruesome battle scenes and behind-the-scenes political

intrigues, the work is anything but 'peaceful.' But the generic appeal of warrior tales, which was a fixture of medieval literature, has long attracted readers— Japanese and otherwise— with a penchant for the world of samurai exploits.

And so it was that the twin pinnacles of Japan's early *monogatari* tradition— *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*— would inspire endless retelling, pictorial representation, and performative adaptations. In particular, the *Heike* work, which in effect is a sequence of dramatized accounts, gave rise to a unique tradition of balladry— *Heikyoku*— which adapted famous episodes into what would become a standard repertoire of ballads. These became the property of a guild of itinerant musicians, the *biwahōshi*— blind performers who traveled widely, disseminating *Heike* legend and lore throughout the land.

Notwithstanding the centrifugal forces that extended the reach of literary and cultural materials to the masses living on the periphery, the great works of Japanese literature remained the product of enduring courtly styles, conventions, and techniques. These in turn would be adapted to suit the distinctive medieval aesthetic of transience and ephemerality.

### Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

Keene, Donald, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia, 1988)

Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990)

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Genji and Heike: Selections From The Tale of Genji and The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford, 1994)

Morris, Ivan, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (Columbia, 2007)

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

### Discussion Questions and Topics

As both a 'classical' work of Japanese fiction and the most famous literary evocation of its warrior class, how does *The Tale of the Heike* compare with Murasaki's *Genji*?

The influence of medieval Buddhism on the literature and arts of the period is both profound and pervasive. This raises the question of how someone lacking knowledge of the Buddhist 'subtext' can best approach— and appreciate— this literature. Give thought to parallels with examples of Western literature and art that are imbued with Judeo-Christian or Islamic 'content.'

Can Japan's meditative aesthetic, which is typically identified as 'uniquely Japanese,' be seen as having universal relevance?

In what ways has Japan's medieval literature and culture— especially the iconic samurai warrior— been deployed in the modern and contemporary media and pop-cultural context?

## Images



1898 woodblock print, by Toyohara Chikanobu, depicting Tomoe taking Moroshige's head. Source: Artelino Japanese Prints.



Woodblock print (ca 1820) depicting the encounter between Kumagai and Atsumori. Source: Library of Congress.

大河ドラマ



# 義経

原作：宮尾登美子  
『宮尾本 平家物語』『義経』

脚本：金子成人

主演：滝沢秀明

【総合テレビ・デジタル総合テレビ】(日)午後8:00～ 再放送:(土)午後1:05～

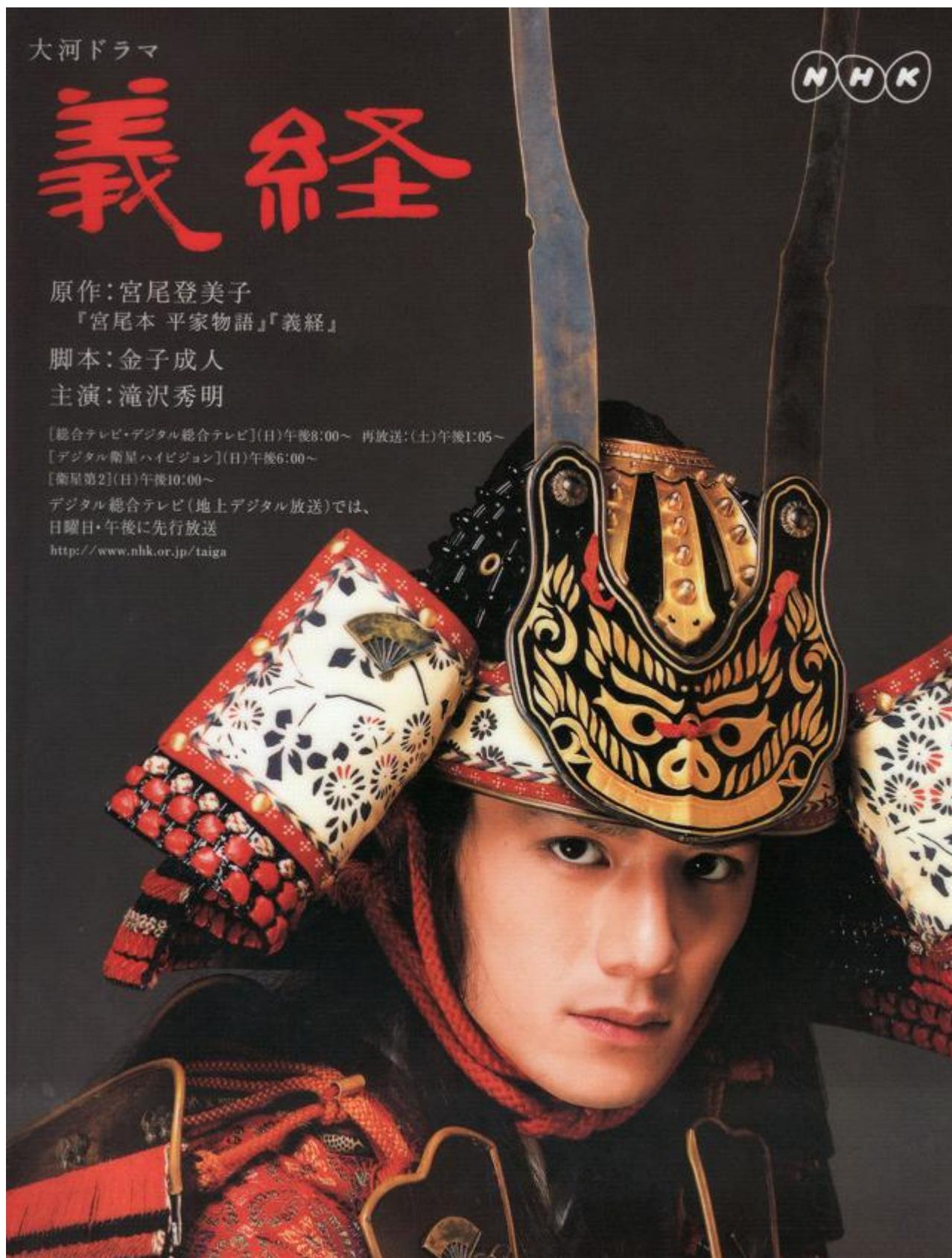
【デジタル衛星ハイビジョン】(日)午後6:00～

【衛星第2】(日)午後10:00～

デジタル総合テレビ(地上デジタル放送)では、

日曜日・午後に先行放送

<http://www.nhk.or.jp/taiga>



The figure of Yoshitsune in a publicity piece for NHK's year-long (2005) weekly TV drama featuring the exploits of the great Minamoto warrior. Source: NHK



*Heikyoku* performance in Tokyo, 2000. Source: Kokugakuin University.