

JAPANESE LITERATURE – Postclassical Period

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SECTION I : CLASSICAL PERIOD

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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.

PART I : POETRY

Heian Literature and the Role of Poetry

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. Earlier experiments with Chinese-inspired poetry led to the primacy of the *waka* poetic form— a thirty-one syllable lyric in a 5-7-5-7-7 syllable prosody. *Waka* poetry, which aimed at the subtle evocation of one's emotional and aesthetic sensitivity through the use of natural and seasonal imagery, served as a model of interpersonal communication and an index of one's breeding and cultural sophistication. Prose writing across the spectrum of genres would typically incorporate *waka* in order to express *kokoro*— one's inner being. And court poets routinely gathered to exchange poems, critique them, and engage in poetic competitions. The pinnacle of poetic recognition was having one's poetry included in one of the official *waka* anthologies commissioned by the Emperor himself.

Poetic expression thus emerged within the Imperial court over thirteen centuries ago as a key index of one's character, and the Heian tradition of *waka*-based court poetry occupies a privileged place in the canon of Japanese classical literature.

Roots: The *Man'yōshū*

The heartland of Japanese poetry can be traced to the eight-century Nara period, a time of intense poetic activity among the aristocratic class, who by that time had studied the great Chinese poets and crafted their own verse as well— in both Chinese *and* Japanese. The Nara courtiers aimed at demonstrating the 'coming of age' of Japanese poetry through an anthology of vast proportion— the *Man'yōshū*, A Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves (ca 760), comprising well over four thousand verses. Meant to represent the entire range of the native poetic voice— from the anonymous, seemingly crude efforts of ordinary folk to the highly crafted work of court poets— the *Man'yōshū* speaks to the exquisite refinement and sophistication of these early poets. Their most celebrated figures— Hitomaro, Akahito, Okura, Tabito, and Yakamochi, among others— succeeded in channeling the grandeur and artistry of admired Chinese verse through their own language and circumstance, in a powerful and resonant voice. The cardinal virtue of *makoto*— a sense of unalloyed sincerity and unmannered emotionalism— would subsequently be attributed to this great collection and, by extension, to the age for which it stands.

The *Man'yōshū* contains many examples of 'long verse'— *chōka*— a genre that would gradually be displaced by the shorter *waka* form. The acknowledged master of this longer form, and a figure renowned as something akin to Japan's first poet laureate, is Hitomaro. His work has been celebrated for a depth of spirit and moral integrity within an intimate, personal compass. One of his *waka* poems conveys something of the subtlety, economy, and understatement of Japanese lyrical expression:

<i>honobono to</i>	In the dim, dim light
<i>Akashi no ura no</i>	Of the early morning mist
<i>asagiri ni</i>	On Akashi Bay
<i>shimagakureyuku</i>	A boat fades behind the isles—
<i>fune wo shi zo omou</i>	My heart following in its wake

Other *Man'yōshū* poets favored a more direct and impassioned personalism. Okura was such a poet. His longer narrative poems reflect upon life's ephemerality, on poverty and aging, and on human vanity and self-deception. But his most moving *chōka*, composed as an elegy to his deceased son Furuhi, expresses the raw, searing grief of a bereaved parent:

Then suddenly a mighty storm blew up,
Caught us unawares, overwhelmed us with its blast.
Helpless, distraught, not knowing what to do,
I tucked back my sleeves, I took in my hand
A clear, spotless mirror.
With upturned face, I beseeched the gods of the sky.
Forehead to the ground, I implored the gods of the earth. . .

But though I begged them in frantic supplication. . .

His body wasted, changing little by little.

He uttered no more the words he had spoken

With each new morning.

And his life came to an end.

I reeled in agony, stamped my feet, screamed aloud,

Cast myself down, looked up to heaven, beat my breast.

I have lost my son, the child I loved so dearly.

Is this what life is about? [Based on Carter, TJP 37, 49-50]

In subsequent periods, the *Man'yōshū* would assume canonical status as the repository of a pure Japanese spirit, unsullied by foreign cultural borrowing. The work would serve as a touchstone for nativist evocations of Japanese uniqueness and superiority, to help bolster a sense of national identity and collective memory.

Heian Court Poetry and the *Kokinshū*

Inspired by their *Man'yōshū* poetic predecessors, ninth-century Kyoto court poets gravitated toward *waka* composition, embracing the thirty-one syllable form with a dedication that would transcend mere avocation and become a way of life— a *michi*. What is more, the shared passion for poetic expression was such that correspondence, especially among lovers, would include the obligatory exchange of *waka*. In stark contrast to the mundane world of political and economic affairs, Heian literature attests to the 'soft power' of poetry as a gateway into a transcendent realm of beauty.

Yet the Heian court poets did indeed have a political agenda of their own. Their dedication to virtuosity sought a tangible form of recognition. This came in the form of the *chokusenshū*— imperially-commissioned anthologies of *waka*. The first such anthology, compiled under the imperial aegis by the poet Tsurayuki, was the *Kokinshū* (Collection of Poems Old and New, 905). The collection's carefully organized sequence of one thousand *waka* poems, centering on the two key categories of seasonal and love poetry, became the standard for poetic anthologies produced over the centuries.

Tsurayuki's preface to the *Kokinshū* famously enunciates the transcendent value of lyrical expression: 'Poetry moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of the invisible gods and spirits, smooths the relations of men and women, and calms the hearts of fierce warriors.' The two key terms here are *kokoro*— depth of emotion, interiority; and *kotoba*— proper poetic diction. Hereafter, Japanese poetry would be composed— and judged— with respect to its proper balance of these essential components.

The special place of nature as a touchstone of Japanese culture, with ancient ties to Shintō myth and ritual, is reflected in the ubiquitous role of the seasons in its classical poetry— not to mention pictorial

arts, textile design, *ikebana*, lacquer ware, and so forth. Spring and autumn were accorded particular prominence, on account of their aesthetically-pleasing 'transitional' qualities, and *waka* on these lyrically rich seasons have been prized over the centuries.

Narihira

Among the ranks of Heian court poets, several stand out— Ariwara no Narihira, Ono no Komachi, and Tsurayuki himself. Narihira's stature rivaled that of his great predecessor Hitomaro, but for very different reasons. The following verse, among Narihira's best-known *waka*, is a miniature masterpiece of lyrical subjectivity, featuring a poetic speaker who expresses the appropriately elegant tone of artful indirection.

<i>tsuki ya aranu</i>	Is this not the moon?
<i>haru ya mukashi no</i>	And is this not the springtime,
<i>haru naranu</i>	The springtime of old?
<i>waga mi hitotsu wa</i>	Only this body of mine
<i>moto no mi ni shite</i>	The same body as before [TJP 80]

Narihira's artful ambiguity has led many to judge the *Kokinshū*, and Heian court poetry overall, as overly 'precious'— excessively mannered and affected. Yet this poet ranked as a cultural paragon. And despite the virtually nonexistent biographical record, Narihira and his poetry would be immortalized in an anonymous classic of the mid-tenth century— *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise, 950).

Tales of Ise

Tales of Ise is a hybrid work. Bearing the *monogatari* label, it comprises 125 short narrative episodes centering on Narihira's legendary romantic affairs. But each episode is highlighted by one or more of Narihira's *waka* compositions, the effect of which is to render the work as a cleverly-wrought poetic anthology. It also bears consideration as a form of fictionalized literary biography. The following is a representative episode:

Once in the days after the move from Nara, when people were still not settled in the new capital, a certain man [*aru otoko*] discovered a woman living in the western part of the city. She was charming to look at, and her disposition was even more delightful than her appearance. It seemed that she was not single, but the man made love to her anyway, even though he was an honorable fellow. His conscience must have bothered him after he got home, because he sent her this poem. It was early in the Third Month and a drizzling rain was falling.

<i>oki mo sezu</i>	Having passed the night
<i>ne mo sede yoru wo</i>	Neither waking nor sleeping,
<i>akashite wa</i>	I have spent the day
<i>haru no mono tote</i>	Brooding and watching the rain—
<i>nagamekurashitsu</i>	The unending rains of spring

[McCullough, CJP 41]

In this second episode of *Ise*, the ‘certain man’ (*aru otoko*) is understood to represent Narihira, given that he had composed the featured verse— one that had previously appeared in the *Kokinshū*. *Ise*’s author removed it from that context and placed it within this series of narratives concerning the amorous exploits of Narihira’s surrogate, the ‘certain man.’

Komachi

Narihira’s female counterpart, Ono no Komachi, combined poetic virtuosity with an explicitly sensuous and passionate persona.

ito semete	When carried away
koshiki toki wa	By passionate desire
nubatama no	I wear my bedclothes inside out—
yoru no koromo wo	Dark as the darkest
kaeshite zo kiru	Pitch-black night

A fixed star in the Japanese literary firmament, Komachi has been endlessly anthologized, appropriated, and depicted in iconic images. She has figured as the protagonist of no less than five Noh plays, not to mention film and *anime* adaptations. The Komachi legend contrasts the passionate young lover and her transformation into a wretched old woman— reduced to bitter memories and unrequited longings. Be that as it may, Ono no Komachi’s poetic achievement is of the very highest order.

The work of Heian poets is a vast tapestry, and it should not be judged summarily. Yet the weight of its formal rules and practices has led some to blame Tsurayuki for having in effect strangled the life out of Japanese poetry.

As the Heian era progressed and the Kyoto aristocracy grew increasingly removed from affairs of state and the world beyond the capital, courtiers became ever more dedicated to their poetic pursuits. This would play out in the establishment of rival poetic factions and in the proliferation of poetic gaming and competition. Over the ensuing centuries, the court-centered poetic world would take on a curiously feudal quality, marked by closely-guarded poetic ‘secrets’ and at times embarrassingly competitive and petty squabbles. With the modern period, however, factional rivalries and hair-splitting trivialities would give way to an expansive field of poetic expression that continues to draw inspiration from the time-honored *waka* medium.

Readings

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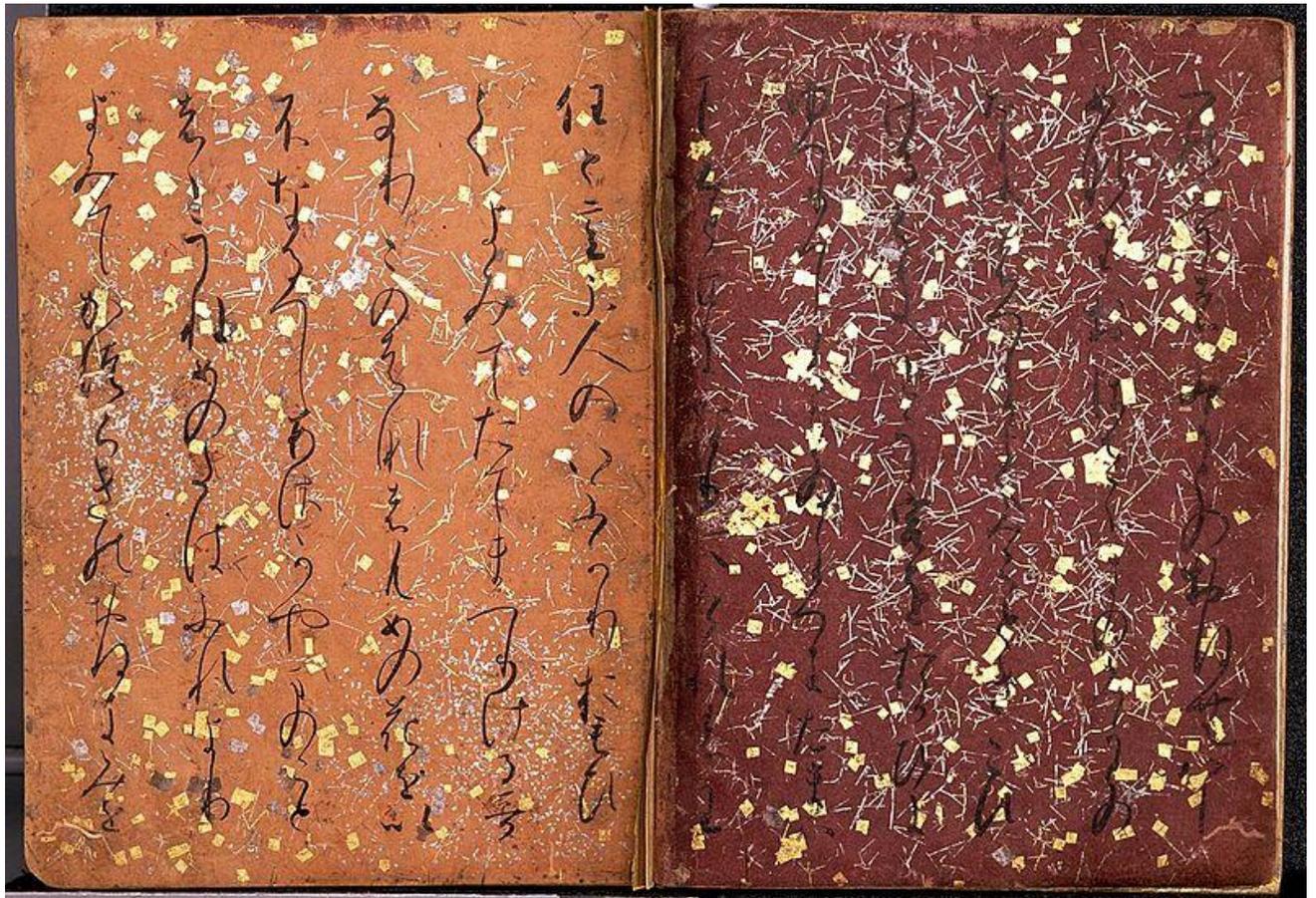
Discussion Questions and Topics

What aspects of classical Japanese poetry do you find particularly attractive? What do you regard as most daunting and difficult to understand? In other words, what appears to qualify as 'uniquely Japanese,' as opposed to that which strikes you as 'universal'?

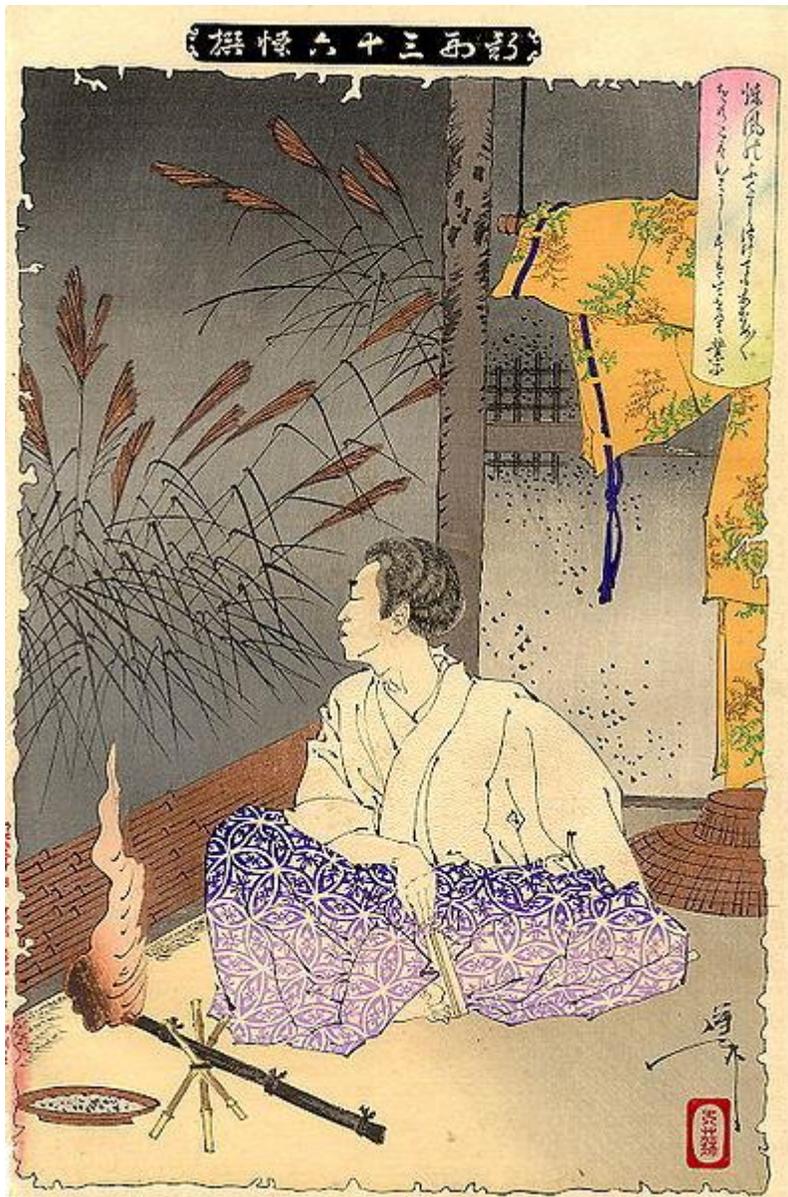
Consider the ways in which seasonal and natural imagery were used to suggest, rather than 'proclaim,' one's feelings and emotions. Give thought to the strong contrast with the more 'unmediated' personalism that marks Western poetry. How might this reflect our privileging of direct emotional expression?

Classical poetry, in its heyday, was not regarded as 'literature' per se, but was seen as a fusion of artful calligraphy, an elegant choice of paper, a skillful manner of reciting the verse in question— and, of course, the proper choice of word and image to suit the season and the poetic occasion. Are there vestiges of such refined artistry in the contemporary world, or is this precisely part of the exotic, other-worldly aura of the Heian court and similar cultural 'utopias'?

Images



Selection of verse from the oldest extant complete edition of the *Kokinshū* (ca 1120). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Woodblock print depiction, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, of Narihira looking for the ghost of Komachi on an autumn night (1891). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Woodblock print depiction of Ono no Komachi as an old woman, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, 1886. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

PART II : MONOGATARI (Fiction)

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 an 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 Buddhist 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 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

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Discussion Questions and Topics

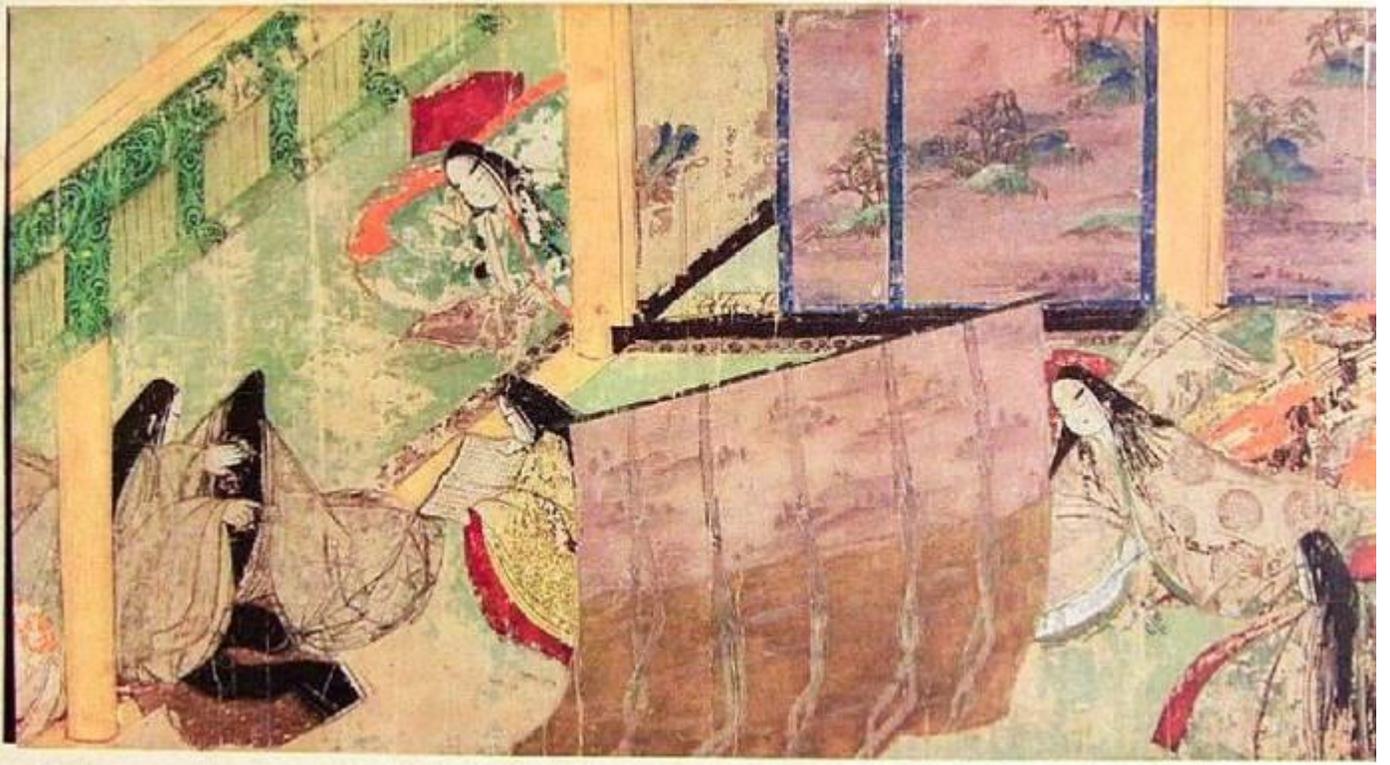
The Tale of Genji can be read as both reflecting the unique lifestyles and practices of the Heian court, and the more universal qualities of human interaction and romantic sensibility. Give thought to how these two 'readings' intersect and interrelate.

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 III : AUTOBIOGRAPHY

NIKKI (Diary)

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 (*kikônikki*). 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* (*Kagerônikki*, 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, T_{JL} 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.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

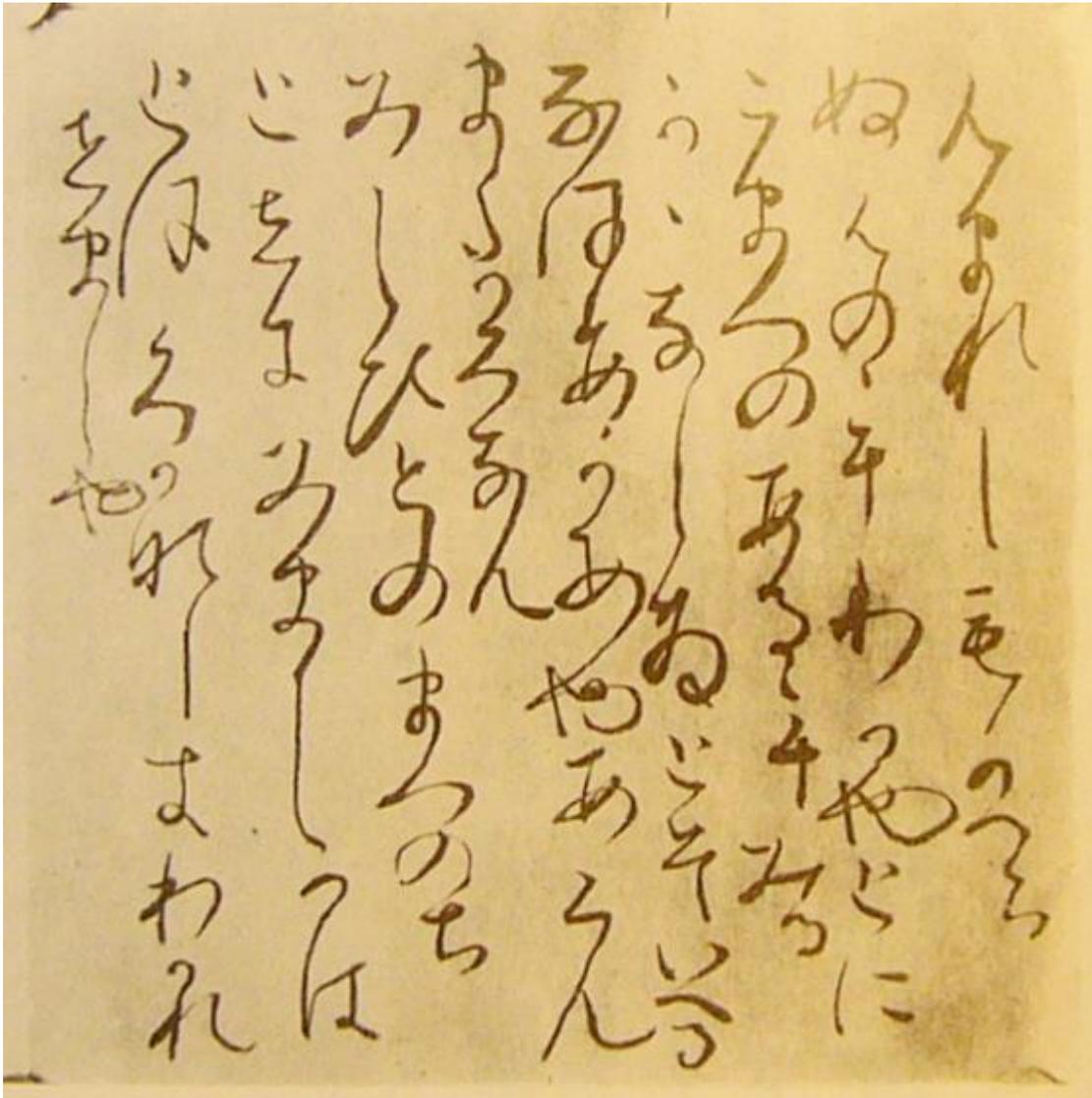
Compare the role of poetry and poetic expression in the three diary examples.

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?

Images



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

PART IV : ESSAY

ZUIHITSU (Essay)

Heian Literature and the Role of *Zuihitsu*

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. Personal narratives, too, gained wide currency, and once established they would maintain their privileged status over the centuries. There developed a particular interest in the so-called *zuihitsu*, or essay form—writing that recounted one's opinions, reminiscences, and reflections in a seemingly random and spontaneous fashion. As with other Heian personal writing, the accomplished *zuihitsu* would achieve a fusion of 'in-the-moment' improvisatory invention and a mastery of courtly style and elegant diction. The inclusion of details regarding day-to-day events and experiences points to the interconnectedness of Heian essays, diaries, and memoirs. In a sense, these so-called 'genres' are best understood as variants of personal narratives crafted in the 'courtly style,' intended both as a mode of private expression and a literary produce to be shared and appreciated among the impressively literate courtly class. It bears nothing, however, that poetry and poetic sentiment were an integral component of these narrative forms.

The Heian *zuihitsu* genre has long been associating with a single work that epitomizes the genre— *The Pillow Book* of SeiShônagon (Makura no sôshi, ca 1010).

The Pillow Book

Paralleling *Tale of Genji*, *The Pillow Book* was highly regarded in its own day and has ever since been regarded as the unrivalled classic of its genre. We know little of its author, a contemporary of MurasakiShikibu who served Lady Teishi, the Imperial consort. But her collection of personal musings and reflections, numbering over three hundred in the standard edition, contain some of the most-cited passages in all of Japanese literature.

The *Pillow Book* begins with a classic statement regarding the seasons and how they are to be properly appreciated:

In spring, the dawn. As the light gradually increases, the rim of the hills reddens just a bit, and we see slender purplish-red clouds trailing in the sky.

In summer, the night. I need no mention the times when the moon is visible, but it is pleasant also to watch fireflies flitting to and fro in the darkness. Even the falling rain has its charm.

In autumn, the evening. When the bright setting sun has sunk very close to the mountaintops, it is moving to see crows flying toward their roosts. Still more delightful is a file of wild geese looking very tiny.

In winter, the early morning. When the frost is white, the sight of servants hastily kindling fires and carrying glowing charcoal here and there seems peculiarly appropriate to the season.
[Based on McCullough, CJP 158-59]

SeiShônagon was no shrinking violet, and her acerbic and witty commentary on the manners of courtly contemporaries has a pungency and flamboyant confidence that time has not diminished. Although attuned to the religious practices of the day, she had no hesitation in calling attention to very down-to-earth concerns regarding the Buddhist clergy and the religious pretensions of her contemporaries. For instance, consider Episode 39 of *The Pillow Book*:

A preacher ought to be handsome. It is only when we keep our gaze fixed firmly on a good-looking monk's face that we feel the holiness of the text he expounds. If the man is ill-favored,

our gaze wanders and we lose track of what he is saying. For this reason, it seems to me that listening to an ugly monk's sermon may actually lead us into sin. . .

I wonder, too, about the honesty of those who make a point of being the first to arrive wherever there is to be a sermon, informing us that sutra expositions are holy occasions and that they themselves are simply bursting with piety. [Based on CJP 165]

The largest and most distinctive category of *The Pillow Book* is its many lists of items under set topics (*monozukushi*). Shônagon was a great list-maker, itemizing things that she found depressing, elegant, embarrassing, adorable, and awkward. These wonderfully idiosyncratic expressions of her tastes and attitudes have come to epitomize her work, and they have generated various forms of imitation over the centuries.

Under the category of 'Hateful Things,' for instance, she includes: a hair that has got caught in the stone on which one is rubbing one's ink stick; an elderly person who warms the palms of his hands over a brazier and stretches out the wrinkles; a flight of crows circling about making loud caws; people who snore and sneeze; mosquitoes; fleas; scurrying mice, and the husbands of nurse-maids. She observes that oxen should have small foreheads, that page-boys should be small with loosely hanging hair, and that palm-leaf carriages should move slowly.

The following items are listed under the category 'Things That Make One Uncomfortable':

- While conversing with a guest whom one has received, one hears people inside the house saying all sorts of indiscreet things. It is irritating to have no way of shutting them up.
 - A man of whom one is fond gets frightfully drunk and keeps repeating the same thing with a sagacious air.
 - The doting parents of an unattractive young child pet him, play with him, and repeat what he says, imitating his voice.
 - With a knowing air, an ignoramus drops the names of historical figures in front of a learned person.
 - Someone makes another person listen to a mediocre poem of his own and announces that so-and-so has praised it.
 - A conspicuously neglectful son-in-law encounters his father-in-law at a public function. . .
- [Based on CJP 178-79]

Everything in Shônagon's world is subject to her unflinching judgmental gaze, and her pronouncements bespeak an exacting standard of decorum and style. What we might regard as superficial and merely modish is rendered as something akin to a moral imperative— surface remade into substance. SeiShônagon's unique work did much to establish propriety, decorum, and good taste as important cultural properties. And her brilliant fusion of social satire, wit, and wisdom is reminiscent of 'stylish' writers of our own day— among others, one thinks here of Dorothy Parker, Diana Vreeland, and M.F.K. Fisher.

In conclusion, the essayistic Heian *zuihitsu* genre, as mastered by SeiShônagon, provides a compelling and convincingly authentic glimpse into the rich interiors of courtly life and the tastes and peculiarities of the aristocratic class. As with the other classical genres, the fusion here of fictive, poetic, and diary-like passages and episodes is worth noting.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What are the similarities and differences between the classical Japanese essay form and Western examples with which you are familiar?

What are the qualities of 'selfhood' that emerge in SeiShônagon's work? What does her work say about the life styles of Heian courtiers— their tastes, attitudes, and interactions? Can it be argued that the work chiefly conveys a female perspective, which should not be attributed to the world of the male courtiers?

If Shônagon's work can be said to constitute a handbook of courtly style and deportment, what are the chief attributes of this style? Do the qualities that Shônagon admirers have any parallels in our own world? Are her own tastes and standards ultimately superficial and elitist?

How does this work serve to express the lyrical and poetic sensitivity that ostensibly underscores Heian literature in general?

Images



Iconic representation of Sei Shônagon and a representative poem, included in Fujiwara Teika's early 13th-century *One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets* (Hyakunin Isshu). Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Depiction of Sei Shônagon and a courtier in a woodblock print attributed to Tsukioka Settei, 1760s. Source: Public domain.

SECTION II : MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Contents

Overview

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Part II : DRAMA

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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.

PART I : POETRY

Medieval Literature and the Role of Poetry

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 with its prose counterparts, medieval Japanese poetry combined established forms and techniques with themes that reflected the prevailing order— 'new wine in old bottles,' in other words. The *Kokinshū* prototype remained the standard for poetic anthologizing. But in 1205, precisely three centuries after its compilation, a new imperial anthology—the *Shinkokinshū* (literally, 'a new *Kokinshū*')— would provide the fresh poetic vintage poured into this time-honored receptacle.

Shinkokinshū

Comprising some two thousand *waka* spanning *Man'yōshū* verse and the work of contemporary poets, the *Shinkokinshū* in effect took Tsurayuki's poetic vehicle and moved it into overdrive. Thanks to the genius of its compiler, retired Emperor Gotoba, its poems were arranged according to a remarkably sophisticated technique of association (of image, language, rhetoric) and progression (through geographic locale and the four seasons). What is more, the poems were sequenced so as to take into account the source poems (*honka*) to which they alluded— a higher-order technique that presumed unusual virtuosity on the part of the audience.

A favorite trope of the early medieval court poets, and one that epitomizes their fascination with the dimly seen, the transitory, the spare and understated— is 'autumn dusk' (*aki no yūgure*). The following verse is one of many contributions to the *Shinkokinshū* by the renowned poet-priest Saigyō:

<i>kokoro naki</i>	Even one who claims
<i>mi ni mo aware wa</i>	To no longer have a heart
<i>shirarekeri</i>	Feels this sad beauty—
<i>shigi tatsu sawa no</i>	Snipes flying up from a marsh
<i>aki no yūgure</i>	On an evening in autumn [Carter, TJP 161]

The lonely, barely visible scene, with its muted, drab landscape, pointedly evokes the classical 'aware' response of poetic receptivity. With the very next verse in the collection, Fujiwara no Teika provides his own variant on the autumnal theme:

<i>miwataseba</i>	Looking far, I see
<i>hana mo momiji mo</i>	No sign of cherry blossoms
<i>nakarikeri</i>	Or crimson leaves—
<i>ura no tomaya no</i>	A reed-thatched hut on a bay
<i>aki no yūgure</i>	On an evening in autumn [Carter, TJP 197]

With these strikingly unstriking verses, two of Japan's most celebrated poets helped establish a new aesthetic of *sabi*— that which is 'artfully' aging, rusticated, and unadorned. *Sabi* resonates with the Buddhistic ephemerality at the heart of medieval narratives such as *The Tale of the Heike*.

Admirers have exalted the *Shinkokinshū* as a crowning literary achievement. But this is poetry that does not yield to facile understanding, in part owing to the fierce dedication of a circle of poets to an art that held transcendent value and to a level of technical virtuosity that would exclude the uninitiated. For these individuals, poetry was life itself. Here, after all, was the very wellspring of tradition, and as its 'conservators' they were tasked with preserving elite literary cultivation in the face of forces threatening its decline.

Hyakunin isshu

Fujiwara no Teika, a poet of unparalleled reputation and authority, is responsible for compiling a collection that stands as *the* defining work of Japanese poetry. In 1235, Teika compiled the *Hyakunin Isshu*— a

chronological ordering of one hundred *waka*, comprising one representative verse by a hundred major poets. In short, this is both a 'greatest hits' collection and a history in microcosm of five centuries of court poetry.

Although Teika tended to favor love poetry, the verse by the Heian poet Ryôzen underscores the lyrical melancholy of the medieval age:

<i>sabishisa ni</i>	Out of loneliness
<i>yado wo tachiidete</i>	I got up and left my hut
<i>nagamureba</i>	Just to look around
<i>izuku mo onaji</i>	But outside it was all the same—
<i>aki no yûgure</i>	Evening in autumn [Carter, TJP 228]

While properly belonging to the *hyakushu uta* genre of hundred-verse sequences, Teika's *Hyakunin Isshu* would become established as a popular game played as part of the traditional New Year's celebration. Featuring a set of playing cards— each with a poem and an image of the poet— the game, which requires a mastery of Teika's collection, entails identifying and claiming the card belonging to the poet whose verse is being recited. The game is still played, although among a declining segment of the population— an example of the 'half-full, half-empty' approach to interpreting the survival of cultural traditions in the modern age.

Renga

Japanese poetry developed early on as a group endeavor, which occupied Heian courtiers as of the ninth century. With the medieval period, a new variant of this group-based poetic practice emerged— the genre of linked verse, *renga*.

Prolonged civil strife in fifteenth century Kyoto forced many courtiers to leave the now-imperiled capital and find positions as tutors and mentors to local elites in the provinces. What grew out of this cross-fertilization process was a uniquely creative 'collaboration,' with poets engaging in a round-robin of alternating verses of 5-7-5 and 7-7. Themes and topics were adopted from the established tradition, but a new artistry of verse linking— *tsukeai*— developed, and over time it engendered a complex and demanding process of rhythmic pacing and variation. The participating poets were expected to mix both 'striking' (*mon*) and 'plain' (*ji*) links, and to vary the relatedness of contiguous links— mixing those with a close association (*shin*) and those with a remote connection (*so*). The cultural emissaries from Kyoto were to serve as mentors and judges.

Renga became widely popular throughout medieval Japan. Among the finest sequences is 'Three Poets at Minase' (*Minase sangin hyakuin*, 1488), the work of the noted poet Sôgi and two disciples, Shôhaku and Sôchô. The first six verses suggest the manner in which these poets related their link to that which preceded it, which gets to the heart of *renga* artistry. The initial 5-7-5, the so-called *hokku*, served in effect as the first domino in the hundred-link sequence.

- Hokku:* Some snow still remains
 As haze moves low on the slopes
 Toward evening (Sôgi)
- #2 Flowing water, far away—
 And plum-scented village (Shôhaku)
- #3 Wind off the river
 Blows through a clump of willows—
 And spring appears (Sôchô)
- #4 A boat being poled along,
 Sounding clear at break of day (Sôgi)
- #5 Still there, somewhere—
 The moon off behind the mist
 Traversing the night (Shôhaku)
- #6 Out on frost-laden fields
 Autumn has come to its end (Sôchô) [Carter, TJP 307-8]

Suggesting a Zen-inspired exercise in ego deflation, the art of *renga* envisions a finished product whose collaborative integrity would exceed the sum of its individual parts. This fusion of poetic cultivation, intuitive interaction among like-minded practitioners, and mastery of complex rules and techniques calls to mind jazz improvisation at a virtuoso level of group performance. Yet there remains the seeming paradox of an art form hinging upon creative synergy and spontaneity yet requiring highly restrictive and complex rules and procedures.

The formal practice of *renga* essentially disappeared as of the twentieth century. Yet poets— in Japan and around the world— continue to link verse in new ways using contemporary media and methods. And what is more, not all classical traditions of the medieval period have vanished. For one, Noh theater is very much alive and well.

Noh

Rooted in the aristocratic culture of Kyoto during the second shogunal epoch, the so-called Muromachi period (ca 1340-1570), Noh is an austere, elegant, richly symbolic theatrical form that integrates acting, dance, musical performance, religious ritual, and lyrical composition. Its repertoire largely derives from the received literary tradition— notably, dramatic episodes from *Genji* and *Heike*.

Noh is ripe for iconic representation— the ornately robed, masked protagonist (*shite*), moving with grace and solemnity across a bare stage to the accompaniment of a flute and a drum, with a chorus intoning the text almost as a solemn liturgical rite. The parallels with classical Greek drama are striking. And in its austerity, quasi-religious symbology, technical virtuosity, and spiritual elevation, Noh has a strong affinity with the late-medieval tea ceremony (*chanoyu*).

Although fundamentally a performance tradition, Noh is built upon a fixed repertoire of texts. Largely the work of the great fifteenth-century playwright Zeami, Noh texts provide actors and musicians with the vehicle for a unique aesthetic synergy. And they themselves are counted among the treasures of Japanese literature.

Experiencing actual Noh performance is of the essence, but a textual example will serve to convey its flavor. Moved by the *Heike* tale of Atsumori, the hapless Taira lad who meets his tragic end at the hands of Kumagai, Zeami composed a play that both retells the episode and gives it (and its protagonist) new life. The play concludes as follows:

Atsumori: I was stranded. Reining in my horse,
I halted, at a loss for what to do.

Chorus: There came then, galloping behind me,
Kumagai, shouting 'You will not escape my arm!'
At this Atsumori wheeled his mount
And swiftly, undaunted, drew his sword.
We first exchanged a few rapid blows,
Then, still on horseback, grappled, then fell,
And wrestled on, upon the wave-washed strand.
But you had bested me, and I was slain.

Now karma brings us face to face again
'You are my foe!' Atsumori shouts,
Lifting his sword to strike; but Kumagai
With kindness has repaid old enmity,
Calling the Name to give the spirit peace.

They at last shall be reborn together
Upon one lotus throne in paradise.
Kumagai, you were no enemy of mine.
Pray for me, O pray for my release!
Pray for me, O pray for my release!

[Tyler, *Japanese No Dramas* 47-48]

Zeami's text, with its masterful blending of dramatic reenactment, spiritual reconciliation, and liturgical solemnity, demonstrates the power and majesty of the Japanese language as a literary vehicle. As for the Noh repertoire— it would find a privileged place in the canon, and its individual plays would themselves be subject to a host of appropriations and adaptations, up to the present day. Strictly adhering to centuries-old performance practices, Noh plays remain a staple of the Japanese cultural scene.

While paying homage to the great Heian lyrical tradition, Japan's medieval poetry captured the unique meditative and spiritual qualities of the age. Deeply incorporated into the visual, musical, and performing arts of the age, this poetry ranks among Japan's greatest cultural legacies.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

It can be argued that the Buddhist-inspired qualities of medieval Japanese poetry present formidable barriers to appreciation and understanding. Can you identify aspects of this poetry that you find readily comprehensible and moving? In what sense does it seem strange and 'foreign'?

Compare and contrast Japan's medieval poetry with the court poetry of the Heian era. In particular, how does the natural and seasonal imagery function in these two poetic domains?

How might we appreciate the 'poetic' qualities of cultural products such as Noh theater, tea ceremony, and monochrome landscape paintings? How might we define the 'medieval aesthetic' that can be said to inspire these and other Japanese cultural products?

Images



A selection of *Hyakunin isshu* (One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets) cards. Source: Web-Japan.org



Early 19th-century woodblock print, by Kikuchi Yôsei, of Priest Saigyô, together with a representative *waka*. Source:

Wikimedia Commons.



Noh performance, with the masked central character (*shite*) in the foreground. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Part II : DRAMA

Noh Drama and its Antecedents

Medieval Japanese culture represents the amalgamation of many centuries of literary and performative styles and genres, together with the profound and aesthetically-rich Buddhist meditative traditions. *Noh* drama can be said to representative the confluence of these influences and inspirations.

As with so much of Japan's great cultural legacy, elite patronage played a key role. The emergence of Noh drama is closely associated with one of the early Ashikaga shoguns— Yoshimitsu (1358-1408)— who emerged as an influential patron of the arts in late 14th-century Kyoto. Yoshimitsu is noteworthy for having sought out talented and culturally-sophisticated commoners, providing the wherewithal for their entrée into the elite ranks. Such an individual was the brilliant performer and playwright Zeami (1363-1443), who would go on to establish a new dramatic genre— *Noh*— which would become a fixed landmark on the Japanese cultural map.

Adapting established musical and dramatic conventions and incorporating a range of Buddhist themes, literary allusions, and a rich lyrical vocabulary, Zeami achieved an extraordinary syncretism in his plays for the *Noh* stage. His texts, which have long been considered literary classics in their own right, are performed verbatim, with no improvisatory embroidery. It is the actors, in conjunction with a chorus and musical accompaniment, who collectively breathe life into the words and create the other-worldly atmosphere that Noh has come to represent over the centuries.

Noh Staging and Performance Styles

The *Noh* stage is conspicuously spare and unadorned. The single— and singular— image of a pine tree serves as the conventional stage backdrop. The effect is that of a sacred, meditative space, appropriate for austere ritual and inspiring a deep engagement on the part of the audience. The language of the *Noh* text— with Zeami's work as the pinnacle— is difficult and highly allusive, requiring a high level of literary and cultural sophistication. In short, *Noh* is anything but popular theater, and it has long been considered an aristocratic entertainment. Indeed, its patronage was for centuries restricted to the elite classes, who were expected to have attained sufficient background in, and appreciation of, Japan's classical traditions and texts.

Noh performance is conspicuously non-mimetic; actors' movements are deliberate and highly stylized, conveying solemnity, deep significance, and lyrical depth. Actors share the stage with a chorus— seated individuals who intone portions of the *Noh* text in a manner reminiscent of classical Greek theater. Indeed, the affinity of these two great theatrical traditions has long been noted and appreciated.

Additionally, *Noh* performance includes an important musical component— flute and drums, which generally accompany the various dances (*mai*) that are a fixture of the performance. *Noh* music and dance complement the narrative and recitative core of the play— the story being enacted on stage. Zeami's genius lay in the manner in which he selected key episodes and figures from the classical literary tradition and 'repurposed' them for the *Noh* stage. His two chief inspirations were the twin masterworks of Japanese fiction— the mid-Heian *Tale of Genji* (*Genjimonogatari*) and the early 13th-century *Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*). Additionally, Zeami composed plays inspired by Japan's canonical poets— legendary figures such as Narihira, Komachi, and Saigyô. Indeed, it can be argued that *Noh* drama is irreducibly lyrical in its language and staging, serving as a vehicle for the preservation and advancement of Japanese poetry as the bedrock of Japan's cultural heritage.

Up until modern times, *Noh* was almost exclusively a male performance genre, subject to elaborate conventions and role types. Harking back to Greek theater, the distinction between the lead and supporting roles is crucial. The *Noh* protagonist— the so-called *shite*— is a figure who appears in the first act as an 'ordinary' individual who is encountered by the supporting 'deuteragonist' figure, the so-called *waki*— typically a traveling priest who establishes the identity of the *shite* and elicits his or her story. In the second act of the play, the *shite* appears bearing a mask that signifies one's transformed identity as a ghostly figure, apparition, demon, or wandering spirit seeking healing and salvation. Here the *waki* figure

typically serves in the role of exorcist or priestly healer, through whose agency the *shite* figure— and the play itself— achieves some closure.

Other aspects of *Noh* staging deserve mention. Notwithstanding the austere, spare ambience, the *shite* character is typically adorned in a strikingly ornate garment. Moreover, the *shite* generally employs a fan, in such a way as to enhance the dramatic aura. It is liberally employed in the play's dance segments. And the *shite*'s conspicuous mask— an exquisitely crafted object entrusted to artisans of the highest caliber— can be said to assume a life of its own. The distinctive styles of *Noh* dance, which have roots tracing back to elegant *gagaku* court performance of the 8th century, often dominate the performance. And the manner of textual recitation— *utai*— which is shared by *shite*, *waki*, and chorus, has long been a pursuit of serious amateur practitioners, for whom the language of *Noh*, appropriately intoned, possesses unique artistic value independent of the play's actual staging.

In a typical *Noh* performance, the two acts are separated by an intermission performance, called the *ai-kyôgen*. In contrast with the solemnity of the *Noh*, the *ai-kyôgen* in effect provides comic relief in the form of a prosaic rendering of the drama, with actors speaking in informal vernacular and 'behaving' in a more naturalistic manner. In sum, then, the *Noh* stage provides in microcosm the full spectrum of Japanese performative and narrative arts.

Categories, Repertoire, and Schools of *Noh* Performance

It was during the Tokugawa period that *Noh* drama crystallized into specific role categories and performance schools. The five categories— each with its corresponding masks, dance styles, and narrative conventions— are as follows: 1) god; 2) warrior; 3) woman; 4) mad woman; 5) demon. The entire *Noh* repertoire comprises some 250 plays— although many of them are rarely if ever performed. Again, each play is based upon some classical literary text, legendary figure, or spiritual value.

Four major schools of *Noh* emerged during the Tokugawa— and they are still active: 1) the Tokyo-based Kanze and Hosho schools; 2) The Kyoto-based Kongo school; 3) and the Nara-based Komparu school. The casual outsider would be hard-pressed to differentiate among performances of the different schools. Rather, this is the domain of arts connoisseurship— as with opera, classical music, and so forth.

Representative Plays

The following plays by Zeami can be said to epitomize the classical quality of *Noh* drama, which hinges upon the masterful retelling of earlier works and episodes in the life of legendary cultural figures.

- Atsumori** Based upon a famous episode from the *Tale of the Heike*, this play concerns the sad fate of Atsumori, a young Taira clan nobleman who was killed in battle by the Minamoto warrior, Kumagai. In the play, Kumagai appears as the Buddhist priest Rensho, intent upon praying for the spiritual repose of the man he had killed. (Tyler, 37-48)
- Izutsu** Considered by many to be Zeami's finest play, *Izutsu* (The Well-Cradle) is a deeply moving dramatization of the canonical 10th-century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). Incorporating *waka* poetry by the great Heian poet Narihira, the play is suffused with romantic longing and a wistful evocation of Heian courtly beauty and sentiment. (Tyler, 120-32)
- Nonomiya** One of many *Noh* plays that retell episodes drawn from the *Tale of Genji*, *Nonomiya* (The Wildwood Shrine) concerns the legend of Lady Rokujo, whose unquenchable desire for Genji's affections unleashed a vengeful spirit that cost the lives of her rivals. While recalling the novel's dramatic scenes, the drama ultimately seeks the spiritual reconciliation of the tormented Rokujo. (Tyler, 205-14)

SekideraKomachi One of several plays centering on the legendary figure of Ono no Komachi, the celebrated 9th-century poet known for her beauty and her passionate nature, *SekideraKomachi* presents an homage to the Japanese lyrical tradition and the 'Way of poetry.' Appearing as an old, forlorn woman, the *Komachishite* figure is animated in the process of recalling her youth and the poetry that epitomized it. (Tyler, 225-36)

The Noh Aesthetic

As a syncretic and classically-inspired Japanese cultural tradition, *Noh* drama incorporates elements of Heian courtly beauty (*miyabi*), Buddhist ritual and belief, and prized (albeit highly abstract) poetic values such as *yugen* (mystery and depth), *sabi*(imperfection and rusticity), and *mujo* (ephemerality). More to the point, the playwright Zeami produced a number of treatises on the art and craft of *Noh* performance. These center on the notion of *hana*— the 'flower' of sublime acting style and perfection of form.

One of the key aesthetic qualities of *Noh* concerns *jo-ha-kyu*, a term that refers to the conventionalized rhythm and pacing of the performance. Deriving from the ancient *gagaku* dance genre, *jo-ha-kyu* is said to govern the interaction of an actor's movements, the musical accompaniment, and the play's narrative flow. The language itself privileges the orthodox convention of five- and seven-syllable lines— the heartbeat, so to speak, of Japan's lyrical tradition.

Noh in the Modern Age

As with other time-honored Japanese arts, *Noh* drama has managed to survive— even thrive— in the modern world. Thanks to the vibrancy of its chief schools, *Noh* continues to be staged in the traditional manner. What is more, a National *Noh* Theater in Tokyo further ensures the continued viability of a performance art requiring decades of training and apprenticeship. It bears noting that Japan's public media outlet, NHK, regularly broadcasts *Noh* performances. A less rigid style of performance marks the many regional and local *Noh* societies, which welcome the participation of women and young people.

Among Western artists influenced by *Noh*, one can cite the noted British composer Benjamin Britten, whose *Curlew River* (1964) is an adaptation of the play *Sumidagawa*. And modern Japanese writers such as Yukio Mishima have written plays that retell *Noh* in a contemporary idiom and staging. As might be expected, versions and variants of *Noh* have found their way into Japanese pop culture, in the form of *manga*, *anime*, and assorted 'Noh-esque' products on the consumer marketplace. Finally, one can find hundreds and hundreds of *Noh* performances— long and short— on You Tube.

Ultimately, *Noh* drama can perhaps best be understood as an iconic signifier of 'traditional Japan,' on a par with geisha, samurai, and kabuki. It surely ranks among the most distinguished of Japan's virtuoso arts.

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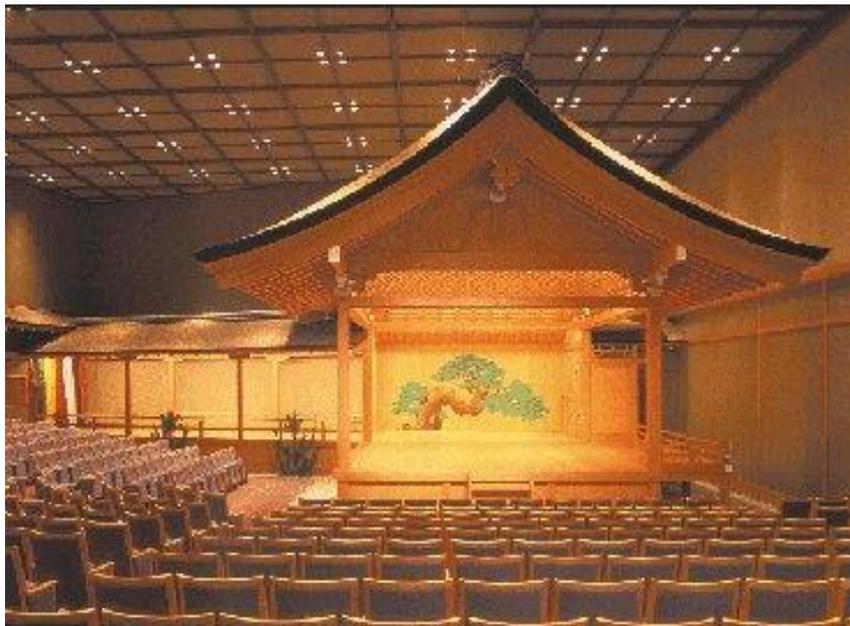
As a classical performance art, *Noh* can be regarded as irrelevant— even intimidating— to those fascinated by Japan but lacking the sufficient background or cultural sensitivity. What would be a good counter-argument here? In what sense can 'esoteric' products such as *Noh* be precisely that which has the power to attract one's interest? How should one go about becoming more knowledgeable and appreciative?

What seem to be the most accessible aspects of *Noh*? What seems most alien— and alienating? Keeping in mind that *Noh* is ultimately a performance art, allow yourself to take in as many performances as possible. Again, You Tube offers them in abundance.

What does it mean to identify *Noh* drama as a syncretic art? How does it compare, say, with classical Greek drama? Or is there an East/ West divide that cannot be breached?

How is one to gain sufficient understanding of Japanese poetry, which is a chief inspiration for *Noh*? Or, rather, should one not be free to glean whatever is appealing about this fascinatingly complex cultural product?

Images (Source for all: Wikimedia commons)



Contemporary *Noh* theater, with its 'shrine-like' ambience. Note the *hashigakari* walkway to the left, which provides stage access to the actors.



Stylized *Noh* stage, with robed *shite* actor in foreground, chorus on the right, and musicians at the rear.



Noh performance on the stage at Itsukushima Shrine, on the Inland Sea near Hiroshima



Three images of the same Noh mask, demonstrating the range of emotional expressiveness that a masked actor can achieve

Part III : FICTION

PART III : MONOGATARI (Fiction)

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 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 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 Gion Shōja 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 Onda Moroshige, 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 14th century)—an epic account of the prolonged conflict that witnessed the overthrow of the Kamakura Shogunate in the mid-14th 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.

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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

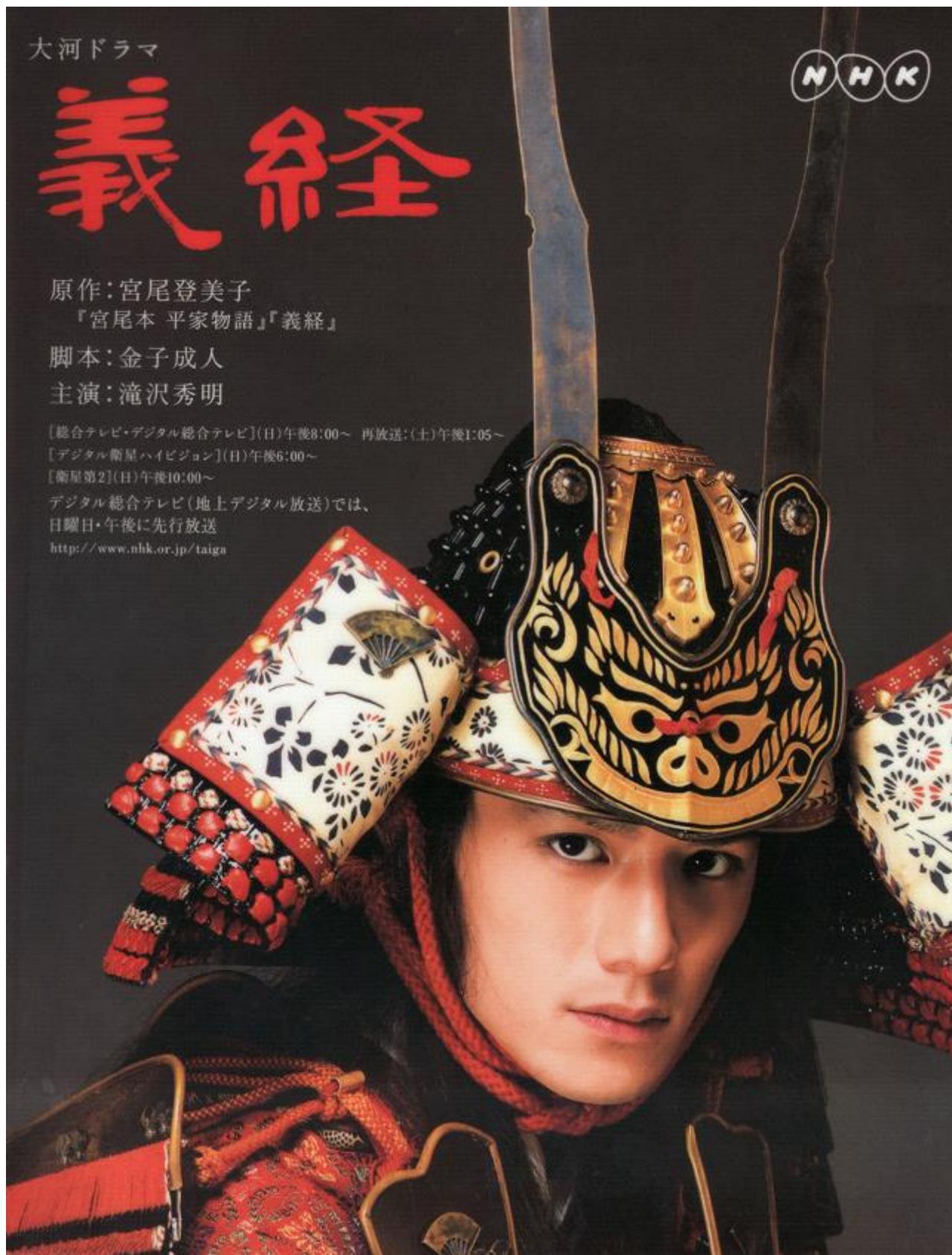
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【衛星第2】(日)午後10:00～

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.

Part IV : AUTOBIOGRAPHY

NIKKI (Diary)

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.

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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 Nijô 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 Nijô

Spanning forty-five years in the life of a woman of high rank, *The Confessions of Lady Nijô* (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 Nijô 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 Nijô 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* (Tōkankikō, 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 Buddhist 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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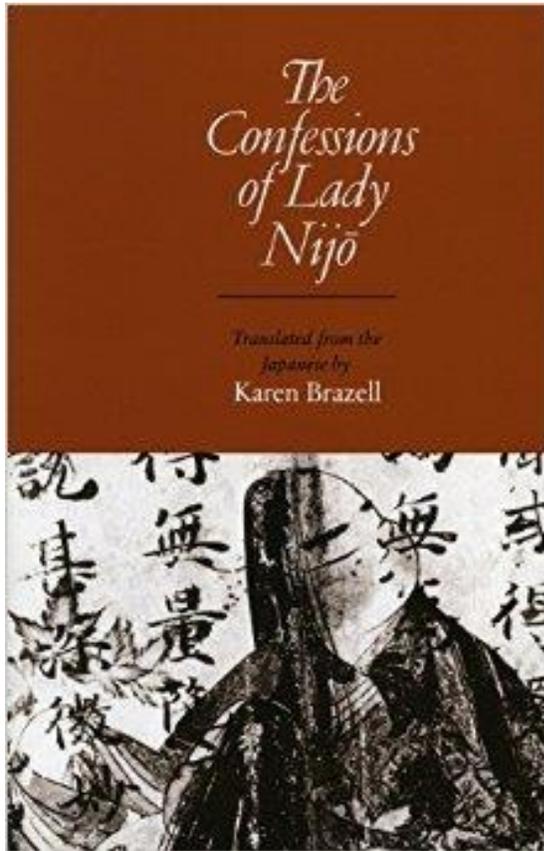
Discussion Questions and Topics

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?

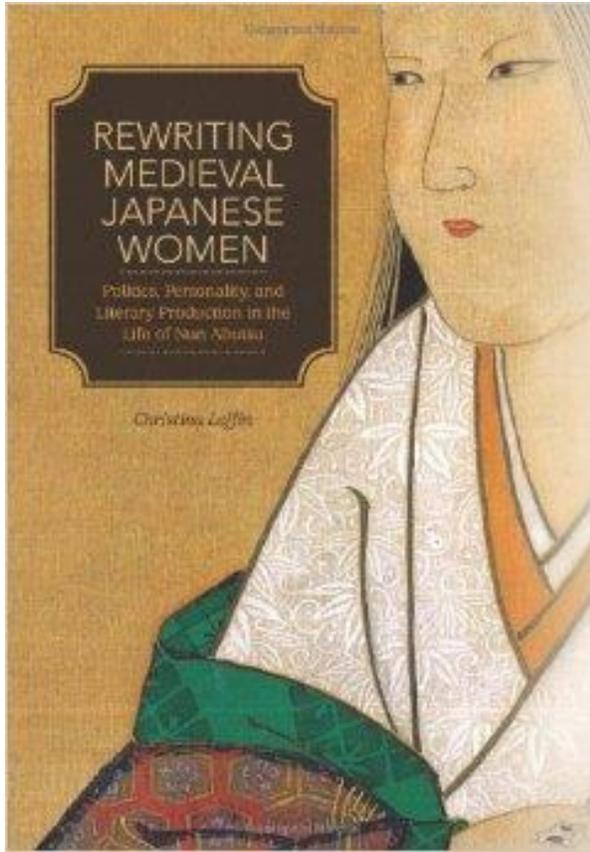
Is there anything distinctive about the day-to-day events recorded in the diaries? What of the poetry, which is so prominent in these works? Do they possess any real substance apart from the poetic content?

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 Nijo's *Towazugatari*. Source: Amazon.com



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

PART V : ESSAY

ZUIHITSU (Essay)

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Zuihitsu*

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 Buddhist-inspired 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 interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As with the other literary genres, essay writing during the medieval period owed a substantial debt to Heian precursors. In particular, SeiShônagon's *Pillow Book* served as the model of court-based personal narrative. Despite the persistence of an aristocratic aesthetic and overall sense of style and sensibility, the pervasive influence of Buddhist belief and ritual would inspire new modes of personal reflection and reminiscence.

Two canonical works of *zuihitsu* point to these key features of the Japanese medieval essay genre: *An Account of My Hut* by Kamo no Chômei and *Essays in Idleness* by Yoshida Kenkô.

An Account of My Hut

Among the high points of medieval literature is an explicitly Buddhistic essay, *An Account of My Hut* (Hôjôki, 1212), written by the Kyoto courtier poet Kamo no Chômei (1155-1216). Chômei favored the reclusive life, which was in fact a predilection of many of his contemporaries. Inspired by the example of Chinese literary recluses and a long tradition of Buddhist religious seclusion, he set out for the hills north of the capital. As legend has it, he built himself a small hut and therein discovered a spiritual home. The affinity with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is striking.

Nothing of the hut remains, if it ever actually existed, but Chômei's essay— *An Account of My Hut*— lives on. Its famous opening lines are equally reminiscent of *The Tale of the Heike* and the book of *Ecclesiastes*:

The current of the flowing river does not cease, and yet the water is not the same water as before. The foam that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never stays the same for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world. . . We are all like foam on the water. I know neither whence the newborn comes nor whither go the dead. For whose sake do we trouble our mind over these temporary dwellings, and why do they delight our eyes? . . . In competing for impermanence, dweller and dwelling are no different from the morning glory and the dew. [Based on Shirane, T.JL 624]

Chômei goes on to recount a series of catastrophes that befell the capital— a great fire, a whirlwind, famine, and a powerful earthquake. The destructive effects are presented in graphic detail— buildings demolished, corpses strewn about. The litany of human travail is relentless, almost liturgical in its narrative momentum. Having thus testified to the futility of human vanity and pride, Chômei arrives at his conclusion:

Reaching the age of sixty, seemingly about to fade away like the dew, I built a new shelter for the remaining years of my life. . . The result was less than a hundredth the size of the residence of my middle age— a mere ten feet square. . . Knowing myself and knowing my world, I have no ambitions. I do not strive. I simply seek tranquility and enjoy the absence of care. . . But the essence of the Buddha's teachings is that we should cling to nothing. Loving my grass hut is wrong. Attachment to my quiet, solitary way of life, too, must interfere with my enlightenment. Why then do I go on spending precious time relating useless pleasures? [TJL 630, 633, 634]

Kamo no Chōmei's literary meditation, at once a moving Buddhist parable and an exemplary personal essay on the theme of ephemerality, conveys a tone of authenticity that would be raised as a standard of literary quality in the modern period.

Essays in Idleness

A century after Chōmei wrote of his 'downsized' life outside the capital, the essay genre would reach new heights with Yoshida Kenkō's *Essays in Idleness* (Tsurezuregusa, 1330). In effect a sequel to Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, Kenkō's essays reaffirm the code of courtly ideals while employing a reflective and at times nostalgic voice. The first episode establishes the essayist's nonchalance with a gently ironic touch:

How foolish I feel when I realize that I've spent another day in front of my inkstone, jotting down aimless thoughts as they occurred to me, all because I was bored and had nothing better to do. [McCullough, CJP 393]

Befitting a literary miscellany, these 'idle essays' vary greatly in length and subject. But Kenkō's narrator repeatedly expresses nostalgic longing for the past.

To sit alone with a book spread out before you in the lamplight is one of life's greatest pleasures. . . In all respects I am drawn to things of ages past. Nowadays, standards of taste are growing more vulgar all the time. Even in the fine furnishings crafted by our woodworkers, I am most pleased by those done in old style. And when it comes to letters, I prefer the language I find on old scraps left from long ago. . . In times of quiet thought, I realized that of all feelings the most difficult to suppress is the longing for things past. [CJP 397, 400]

As with Shōnagon's literary ephemera, some of Kenkō's episodes comment upon aspects of courtly style and fashion. Consider the following:

Court caps in recent years have become much taller than formerly. People who own the old-fashioned boxes must add an extra lid to accommodate the new caps. [Keene, *Essays in Idleness* 58]

From the 'outsider' perspective, this sort of information will appear almost comically superficial and pointless. Other episodes will strike one as bizarre in the extreme:

You should never put the new antlers of a deer to your nose and smell them. They have little insects that crawl into the nose and devour the brain. [Keene 134]

Yet it is precisely the sheer variety of observations and reflections, and their seemingly random arrangement, that distinguish the Japanese *zuihitsu* genre. Matters of 'depth' and 'superficiality' were simply beside the point. Together with Sei Shōnagon's classical *zuihitsu*, Kenkō's essays would become a touchstone of a classical aesthetic that developed over five centuries, as well as a model of essayistic style for generations of writers. Their work is at once a brilliant evocation of the styles and manners of courtly life while reflecting an utter indifference to the 'outside world.' In other words, the insularity and introversion of the Kyoto literary elite during the medieval period sought to preserve aristocratic privilege

and its cultural hegemony while underscoring the growing irrelevance of the imperial center within the larger Japanese political context.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkô* (Columbia, 1967)

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)

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

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

Discussion Questions and Topics

What are the key commonalities and contrasts in the essays Shônagon and Kenkô?

How does Kenkô seek both to preserve something of the Heian cultural legacy and reflect upon the 'reduced' stature of the imperial court in the medieval era?

What, if anything, is revealed of Kenkô's personality and character in the course of musings? Overall, how would you assess Japan's medieval literature in terms of its presentation of convincingly 'authentic' and 'relatable' personalities?

Give thought to the qualities of mind and spirit as revealed in these classical Japanese texts. How can they be related to your own world and the ways in which you reflect upon your place in it?

Images



Model of Kamo no Chômei's hut, erected in 2012 at the Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto, in commemoration of the 800th anniversary of Chômei's essay. Source: John Dougill, *Green Shinto* blog.



Early 19th-century woodblock print, by Kikuchi Yōsai, of Yoshida Kenkō composing his essays by lamplight. Source: Wikimedia Commons.