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Edited by Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki

Excerpt

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General introduction

HARUO SHIRANE

This book is organized according to the major periods of Japanese history – ancient (up to 794), Heian (794–1185), medieval (1185–1600), early modern or Edo (1600–1867), and modern (1868–present). Each part begins with a brief historical overview, followed by short essays on major genres, texts, and authors. A number of the traditional genres – such as *waka* (classical Japanese poetry), *kanshi* (classical Chinese poetry), *monogatari* (tale literature), *setsuwa* (anecdotal literature), and *gunki-mono* (warrior narratives) – span multiple periods, so some entries cover a time-span beyond the section in which they appear. As a literary history, this book attempts to cover the so-called masterpieces of Japanese literature – from *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tales of the Heike* to such major modern authors as Natsume Sōseki – and to provide a balanced view of key genres and themes. At the same time, it is also intended to shed light on many genres that have been overlooked in the modern conception of Japanese literature, examining them from a perspective not limited to European notions of literary history.

Japan has one of the richest and most complex literary traditions in the world, and defining and describing it is difficult. Indeed, it is only in recent decades, as popular genres and the enormous tradition of Literary Sinitic or Sino-Japanese (*kanbun*) writings have received renewed attention alongside better-studied materials, that the full complexity and variety of the Japanese literary heritage has come into view. The modern term for “Japanese literature” (*Nihon bungaku*) came to mean literature written in the “Japanese” language, using the native writing system based on *kana* (*hiragana* and *katakana*), a vernacular syllabary developed in the ancient period and in fairly common use by the ninth century. Such a definition, taken to its logical conclusion, extends beyond Japan’s present borders and would include writing in Japanese by Koreans or Taiwanese during the long periods of Japanese occupation in the twentieth century or by early Japanese immigrants to California or Brazil.

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“Japanese literature” also can mean literature written by so-called ethnic Japanese, who were concentrated in the area from northern Kyushu along the Inland Sea to the Kinai region (the area of present-day Osaka, Kyoto, and Nara) and beyond to the Kantō region (centered on modern Tokyo), most of whom came under the rule of the Yamato clan (the ancestor of the imperial family), which came to dominate the rest of the archipelago (excluding Hokkaido and Okinawa) in the seventh and eighth centuries. This definition of “Japanese literature” includes writings in literary Chinese (Literary Sinitic or *kanbun*), the common written language of East Asia (the regions that are now China, the Koreas, Vietnam, and Japan) and the mainstay of literary, religious, and government writing in Japan for the premodern and early modern periods. One of the major characteristics of Japanese literary culture is that for most of its written history it has constantly used both the vernacular syllabary and Literary Sinitic, with classical Chinese (both its syntax and its graphic compounds) always influencing the native vernacular, and a mixture of the two merging in various styles, particularly the *wakan-konkō-bun* (mixed Japanese–Chinese style) that became dominant from the late Heian period. Basing a definition of Japanese literature on the notion of ethnic Japanese, however, is problematic since the borders of Japan gradually expanded to include areas inhabited by other ethnicities: north-eastern Honshū and the island of Hokkaido (the home of the Ainu), the Ryūkyū Islands (now Okinawa), and then, in the twentieth century (until 1945), Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria. This history does not exclude either sense of “Japanese literature,” but employs both as organizing principles in order to present a more complete picture of Japanese literary traditions.

Another distinctive feature of this book is that modern works have been given far more space than in previous literary histories, due to their increased role in today’s curriculum and global influence on popular and contemporary culture. This modern section embraces both canonical writers (such as Sōseki, Ōgai, Tanizaki, and Kawabata) and the non-canonical, including such subgenres as detective fiction and girls’ manga. It is distinguished by its wide sociocultural scope (incorporating popular culture and contemporary literature, often not recognized in literary histories, and including ethnic Koreans writing in Japanese) and by its trans-national, trans-regional perspective, covering the colonial period literature of Okinawa and of occupied Korea and Taiwan. If, in the premodern and early modern periods, the metropole was China (both imagined and real), in the modern period it became Japan (specifically Tokyo), which stood at the center of a vast empire, mirroring those created by the British, the French, and other European

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powers. In short, this literary history deliberately complicates the notions of Japanese as language and as ethnic identity and the relationship of both to various forms and genres of writing. The remainder of this introduction takes up major characteristics of premodern and early modern literature that set it apart from modern Japanese literature, which fuses with and shares in modern European literary genres and cultural discourse.

The notion of Japanese literature as a national literature (*kokubungaku*) based on a national language (*kokugo*) that precluded the use of languages other than kana-based Japanese vernacular emerged as part of modern nation-state building in the Meiji period (1868–1912), particularly after the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5), in which China was defeated by Japan and lost its preeminent place as the center of cultural and linguistic authority. But premodern notions of literature were very different. The *Genji ippon kyō* (The Genji One-Volume Sutra, 1176), a Buddhist text written by Priest Chōken in the late twelfth century, reveals that the genre hierarchy as it existed in the late Heian and early medieval periods was, roughly, from top to bottom: (1) Buddhist scriptures; (2) Confucian texts; (3) histories such as the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian); (4) Chinese belles-lettres (*bun*) such as the *Wenxuan* (Anthology of Literature), a collection of Chinese poetry and literary prose; (5) Japanese classical poetry; and (6) vernacular tales and *sōshi*, that is, *nikki* (diaries) and related writings in kana. The genre hierarchy here follows the Chinese model, with religious/philosophical texts, histories, and poetry held in the highest regard and fiction relegated to the lowest rung. At the bottom stood the two genres in the Japanese syllabary, *waka* and *monogatari*, with poetry holding a much higher status than prose fiction in kana. Cultural authority also was a major element in this genre hierarchy. The top four categories, the most prestigious genres, were identified primarily with China (*Kara*) – the metropole of civilization at the time. The two bottom genres, by contrast, were identified with Japan (Yamato).

In the eighteenth century, scholars of *Kokugaku* (nativist learning), led by such figures as Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769) and Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), attacked what they perceived to be foreign influences and constructed an alternative sphere of learning based on what they saw as purely Japanese texts. These scholars of nativist learning, whose influence was limited until the modern period, attempted to invert the genre hierarchy found in texts such as the *Genji ippon kyō*. They placed works in the Japanese syllabary, such as *waka* and *monogatari*, at the top, while attempting to de-canonicalize the top four categories, especially Buddhist and Confucian texts and Chinese poetry and histories. It was not until the mid-Meiji period, with the

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rise of modern nationalism, the influence of Western phonocentrism, the emphasis on “national language” (*kokugo*) based on kana, and the defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War, that this inversion became irreversible. Throughout the premodern period, *gakumon*, the Japanese word for learning, meant *Kangaku* (Chinese studies), which was the center of various premodern discourses, and it was not until the establishment of *kokubungaku* (national literature) in the mid-Meiji period that Japanese literature became largely, though not entirely, kana-based literature.

Equally importantly, the modern notion of Japanese literature was formulated in large part under the influence of European notions of literature, which had placed high value on such genres as the epic and drama, and that, from the nineteenth century, elevated the novel to the pinnacle of the genre hierarchy. But owing to both Confucian and Buddhist influences, fiction occupied a very low position in the premodern Japanese textual hierarchy, and the performance arts, including *noh*, *jōruri*, and *kabuki*, were not considered at all. Theater, while culturally important, had never been considered a form of literature until the modern period, when there was a desperate hunt for Japan’s Shakespeare, a role that Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725), the puppet-theater playwright, was made to fulfill. Today, the Genroku era (1688–1704) is best known for the poetry, prose fiction, and drama of Matsuo Bashō (1644–94), Ihara Saikaku (1642–93), and Chikamatsu Monzaemon, respectively. But this view leaves out the two most prominent writers of the period, Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725) and Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), both influential Confucian scholars who wrote essays and treatises in classical Chinese. Such emphases are driven in part by modern notions of literature. But in order to understand the significance of the premodern and early modern works, authors, and genres discussed in this book, it is necessary to expand the “literary” beyond the modern notion of literature as “imaginative” or “creative” writing to recover its earlier functions, which encompassed what are now the disciplinary fields of history, religion, philosophy, philology, and political science.

Due to the close association of literary activity with the imperial court and the upper aristocracy, which provided crucial patronage for literary production, much early literature had a dual private/public character, which is embodied in the function of classical Japanese poetry, the thirty-one-syllable *waka*, which became the central vernacular genre in the premodern period. Indeed, in Heian aristocratic society it was impossible to function without the ability to compose *waka*. At the imperial court, classical Japanese poetry had a public role, often in the

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ritual affirmation of power and social hierarchy, as well as a private, social role, as an intimate form of dialogue and an indispensable vehicle for courtship. This duality is also evident in the *Kokinshū* (Anthology of Old and New Japanese Poetry, early tenth century), the most influential of the imperial poetry anthologies, which was commissioned by the emperor and served to enhance the cultural authority of the throne but which drew most of its poems from private exchanges and collections. Literary Chinese verse (*kanshi*) had a similar dual character, composed in prominent public gatherings like court banquets and poetry parties and collected in imperial anthologies that preceded the *Kokinshū*, but also serving as a medium for educated elite male courtiers like Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) to record personal emotions and experiences.

Early compilations, such as the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720), commissioned by the Yamato court in the early eighth century at a critical period in state building, and the *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Myriad Leaves, late eighth century), similarly affirmed the power and authority of the head of the Yamato clan (imperial family) even as they included poems and stories about commoners and non-court figures. By contrast, the vernacular monogatari (court tales) and collections of *setsuwa* (anecdotal literature) of the tenth through twelfth centuries, written and edited by middle- to lower-rank aristocrats or aristocratic priests, represent alternative voices, often those out of power. The function of much of the vernacular literary culture in the Heian period, particularly after the tenth and eleventh centuries, is thus very different from that of the ancient period. The center of political power had shifted from sovereigns to regents, from the throne to non-imperial clans (primarily the Fujiwara), who controlled the emperor through marriage politics. New power also devolved to the provincial governors (middle and lower levels of the aristocracy), over whom the state ministries had increasingly less control.

The Heian monogatari continued to deal with the lives of the nobility and the emperor, but in contrast to works like the *Man'yōshū*, which enforce the authority, power, and divinity of the sovereign and his or her surrogates, the monogatari violate the sociopolitical order and relativize the authority of the throne. The protagonists of *Ise monogatari* (The Tales of Ise, tenth century) and *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, early eleventh century) belong to clans (Ariwara and Genji/Minamoto) that were ousted. Instead of affirming the dominant clan (the northern branch of the Fujiwara), *The Tales of Ise*, for example, reveals deep sympathy for those who it had defeated or overshadowed.

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Sympathy for political losers and expression of alternative social voices become major features of the monogatari genre and continue into the medieval period with, for example, *Heike monogatari* (The Tales of the Heike, initially compiled in the thirteenth century), a warrior tale that portrays the fall of the house of the Heike (Taira). In contrast to *The Tale of Genji*, *The Tales of the Heike* were sung by traveling minstrels (often to an uneducated populace) and had the ritualistic function of pacifying the spirits of the dead (the defeated warriors) depicted in the long tale. The *Masukagami* (Clear Mirror, fourteenth century), one of the four vernacular “mirrors” or chronicles of political leaders, looks back nostalgically to the exiled emperors GoToba and GoDaigo at a time when the power of the imperial court was in rapid decline. On the other hand, two mid-Heian period historical chronicles, *Eiga monogatari* (Tales of Flowering Fortunes, early twelfth century) and *Ōkagami* (Great Mirror, twelfth century), both also written in the vernacular, portray the life and political rise of Fujiwara no Michinaga, the most powerful regent in the Heian period. But even these vernacular texts give voice to those who were defeated (such as Sugawara no Michizane, who had been a powerful minister until he was exiled by the Fujiwara), thus providing an “unofficial” political and cultural history of the period.

Historically, the center of vernacular poetry shifted from the *chōka* (found in the early *Man'yōshū*), to the thirty-one-syllable *waka* (the central form of the *Kokinshū* and the Heian period), to linked verse in the medieval period, and finally in the early modern period to the seventeen-syllable *hokku* (developed as the first verse of popular linked verse, and only later called *haiku*). Such a gradual paring-down of form and expression occurs in a wide variety of contexts and media: poetry, *noh* drama, landscape gardening, *bonsai*, tea ceremony, and ink painting, to mention only the most obvious. One result is that many traditional Japanese literary forms stress brevity, condensation, and overtones. A parallel development in the *kanshi* tradition was an emphasis on exemplary couplets taken from longer poems, as seen in the highly influential eleventh-century anthology *Wakan rōeishū* (Collection of Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing), which assembled such short gems from Literary Sinitic compositions by Japanese and Chinese authors and paired them with *waka*.

As it evolved under Zeami (c. 1363–c. 1443), its greatest playwright, *noh* was a drama of elegance, restraint, and suggestion. Human actions were reduced to the bare essentials, to highly symbolic movements such as tilting the mask to express joy or sweeping the hand to represent weeping. In *Kakyō* (A Mirror Held to the Flower, 1424), Zeami writes that “if what the actor feels in the

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heart is ten, what appears in movement should be seven.” He stresses that the point at which physical movement becomes minute and then finally stops is the point of greatest intensity. Physical and visual restrictions – the fixed mask, the slow body movement, the almost complete absence of props or scenery – create a drama that must occur as much in the mind of the audience as on the stage.

In *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness, 1329–33), sometimes considered the ultimate compendium of Heian court aesthetics, the aristocrat-priest Kenkō argues that what is not stated, cannot be seen by the eyes, and is incomplete in expression is more moving, alluring, and memorable than what is directly presented. Since ancient times, Japanese aristocrats prized the social capacity for indirection and suggestion. Poetry was recognized for its overtones, connotations, and subtle allegory and metaphor more than for what it actually stated. In large part, this literary and social mode depends on a close bond between the composer and the reader, with a common body of cultural knowledge, which was absorbed through literary texts.

At the same time that noh drama reached its height and *Tsurezuregusa* was being written, another kind of gunki-mono (warrior narrative) emerged in the form of the *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of Great Peace, c. 1370), which was to have more impact on Japanese popular culture, including theater, than perhaps any other text from the medieval period. The *Taiheiki*, which depicts the bloody military conflicts that occurred during the era of the divided imperial courts (1336–92), has little interest in the aesthetics of overtones or the refined associations of classical poetry; instead, it depicts the dog-eat-dog world of the warriors, military trickery, brutal massacres, and rampant fear of vengeful spirits. At the same time, it functioned as a kind of an educational handbook for samurai, depicting the heroism, loyalty, wisdom, ingenuity, brutality, and betrayal of Japanese warriors in the context of famous incidents from Chinese history. The *Taiheiki*, which became the fundamental material for storytelling (called *Taiheiki-yomi*) in the Edo period, is a vivid reminder that premodern Japanese literature cannot be measured solely by the refined aesthetics (noh drama, tea ceremony, ink painting, linked verse, Zen kanshi poetry) that medieval culture is now famous for.

Confucianism and Buddhism were imported from the continent in the ancient period, and provided two major value systems that often came into dramatic conflict. Confucianism became the guide for ethical behavior and social and political relations, based largely on strong familial bonds and filial piety, which ideally mirrored the relationship of subjects to the ruler. Buddhism stressed individual salvation, suffering, detachment, and

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protection from various dangers. Much of Japanese literature from the Nara through the medieval eras stands in a larger Buddhist context that regards excessive attachments – especially family bonds (of the sort emphasized by Confucianism) and the deep emotions of love – as a serious deterrent to individual salvation, particularly in a world in which all things are impermanent. Each individual is bound to a cycle of life and death, to a world of suffering and illusory attachment, until he or she achieves salvation.

By the mid-Heian period, it was believed that strong attachments, particularly at the point of death, would impede the soul's progress to the next world, which, it was hoped, would be the Pure Land, or Western Paradise. In a typical *noh* play by Zeami, the protagonist is caught in one of the lower realms – often as a wandering ghost or a person suffering in hell – as a result of some deep attachment or resentment. For the warrior, the attachment is often the bitterness or ignominy of defeat; for women, jealousy or the failure of love; and for old men, the impotence of age. In Zeami's "dream plays," such as the warrior play *Atsumori*, in which the protagonist (*shite*) appears in the dream of a traveling monk (the *waki* or secondary figure), the protagonist reenacts or recounts the source of his or attachment to the dreaming priest, who offers prayers for his salvation and spiritual release.

Except for didactic literature composed by Buddhist priests, Heian vernacular fiction such as *The Tale of Genji* and women's diaries such as *Sarashina nikki* (Sarashina Diary, eleventh century) usually take a highly ambivalent view of Buddhist ideals, focusing instead on the difficulty of attaining detachment in a world of passion and natural beauty. Indeed, at the heart of Japanese aristocratic literature, particularly from the mid-Heian period onward, lies the conflict between Buddhist aspirations of selflessness (which eventually merged with samurai ideals in the medieval period) and deep emotional attachment to nature and the human world. In *Hōjōki* (Account of my Ten-Foot-Square Hut, early thirteenth century), the waka poet Kamo no Chōmei (1153 or 1155–1216), confronted with a world of suffering and impermanence – natural disasters, famine, the destruction of the capital – retreats to a small hut outside the capital. In the process of preparing for rebirth in the Pure Land, however, he becomes attached to the tranquility and pleasures of his rustic retreat and fears that his attachment to nature and to writing will hinder his salvation.

Conflict tends to be internalized in much vernacular literature, often creating highly psychological or lyrical works. In Zeami's *noh* drama, for example, the characters usually have no substantial external conflict. Instead, the climax occurs when the protagonist is freed of internal attachment or is

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reconciled to himself or herself. When the influence of Buddhism abated in the Tokugawa period (an age of urban growth, capitalism, and commerce, dominated by urban commoners), more secular plot paradigms became prominent, such as the conflict between human desire or love (*ninjō*) and social duty or obligation (*giri*), which lies at the heart of Chikamatsu Monzaemon's puppet plays (*jōruri*). Even so, the ultimate stress of the literature and drama tends to be on intense emotions generated by or in conflict with the pressures of society and social responsibility (supported by Confucian ethics).

Though sometimes possessing elaborate and complex plot structures, vernacular prose tends to be fragmentary and episodic, often focusing on the elaboration of a particular mood or emotion. For example, in vernacular fiction, the poetic diary, and theater (*noh*, *jōruri*), one of the most popular scenes is the parting: a poetic topos that can be traced back to the poetry of the *Man'yōshū*. *The Tale of Genji* is highlighted by a series of partings, which culminate in the climactic death of the heroine. The same can be said of *The Tales of the Heike*, a complex and detailed military epic that repeatedly focuses on the terrible partings that war forces on human beings. The closeness of traditional social ties – between parent and child, lord and retainer, husband and wife, individual and group – make this an emotionally explosive situation, which is often presented in highly poetic language.

Japanese vernacular literature was rooted in a semi-oral narrative tradition that either drew on imported texts from the continent or gathered locally transmitted stories. This storytelling tradition, which came to the fore in the late Heian and medieval periods when commoner culture began to surface, included a wide assortment of myths, legends, anecdotes (*setsuwa*), and folktales, often about strange, supernatural, or divine events. Buddhist priests collected and categorized these stories, which included anecdotes from both China and India, using them to preach to a largely illiterate audience. The *Konjaku monogatari shū* (Anthology of Tales from the Past), which was compiled in the late Heian period, is the most famous example of a collection of such anecdotes. This storytelling tradition also appears in the form of extended epic-like narratives like *The Tales of the Heike*, which was memorized and chanted to the accompaniment of the *biwa* (lute) by blind minstrel-priests, usually in short sessions that focused on one or two episodic sections.

One major consequence of this storytelling tradition is that Japanese vernacular fiction tends to have a strong voice: one or more narrators describe and comment on the action. The conventions of oral storytelling are evident in almost all Japanese prose fiction, including highly

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sophisticated, stream-of-consciousness narratives like *The Tale of Genji*. In performance genres like *The Tales of the Heike*, noh drama, and *sekkyō-bushi* (sermon ballads), this narrational voice flows over the action, dialogue, and scenery, as first and third person narrations overlap. In noh, for example, dialogue alternates with descriptive passages narrated by both the chorus and the protagonist. The position of the narrator is most prominent in jōruri, in which the chanter (*gidayū*), on a dais separate from the puppet stage, performs both the dialogue of the puppets and the narration.

This double structure – action enveloped in descriptive narration – lends itself to powerful lyric tragedy, in which the tone is elegant, poetic, and uplifting even when the subject matter or situation is dark. The love suicide plays by Chikamatsu, the greatest jōruri playwright, are one example. The climactic travel scene (*michiyuki*) – a subcategory of the parting topos – is one of tragedy and pathos: the lovers, who are traveling to the place of their death, have resolved to be united in death rather than live under their present circumstances. The scene is chanted to music and interwoven with allusions to poetic places and classical poetry. The narration consequently elevates the characters even as they die. The same can be said of climactic scenes in *The Tale of Genji* or in the final chapter of *The Tales of the Heike*, when Kenreimon'in reflects on the destruction of her clan. In most of these scenes descriptions of nature and seasons, so central to Japanese vernacular poetry, suggest that death is not an end but a return to nature. Except for some types of folk literature (*setsuwa*), it is hard to find a work of premodern Japanese prose literature that does not include poetry. Often poems spoken by characters or allusions to classical verse (*kanshi* as well as *waka*) appear at such heightened moments, condensing and intensifying their emotional significance.

Since the Renaissance, European theater has generally been split into three basic forms – drama, opera, and ballet – whereas traditional Japanese theater has combined these elements (with particular stress on music, dance, and song) in each of the major dramatic forms: noh drama, jōruri (puppet theater), and kabuki. One of the central principles of noh and jōruri is the *jo-ha-kyū* (introduction, development, and finale), which regulates the tempo of the play, particularly in relationship to dance and song. Even as it creates a window onto another world, the work calls attention to itself as spectacle or ritual, as a medium in which dance, song, costume, and mask play major roles.

The history of Japanese literary genres tends to be accretionary. Every major historical era gave birth to new genres, but usually without the abandonment of the earlier forms. The thirty-one-syllable *waka* (classical poem) emerged in the Nara and Heian periods, classical linked verse in the