



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Japanese Tale of the Heike

Hiroaki Yamashita, Elizabeth Oyler

Oral Tradition, Volume 18, Number 1, March 2003, pp. 30-32 (Article)

Published by Center for Studies in Oral Tradition

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ort.2004.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/51591>

## The Japanese *Tale of the Heike*

Yamashita Hiroaki

The *Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*) is one of Japan's largest warrior tales (*ikusa monogatari*). It exists today in numerous variants that narrate the epochal Gempei War (1180-85 CE) fought between the Minamoto (also called Genji) and Taira (also called Heike) clans. The variants are classified in two primary types, those praising the establishment of Minamoto Yoritomo's shôgunate and those narrating the fall of the Taira clan.

Many scholars have focused their attention on studying the numerous extant variant texts in search of a textual history. In particular, work has been dedicated to finding both the author's ideological position and the version closest to the original form. The question of orally recited texts has been the subject of research by a smaller number of scholars. They focus on written versions of the narrative that appeared around the middle of the fourteenth century and which were the basis for recitations by *biwa hôshi*, blind raconteurs who accompanied themselves on the biwa lute. Several scholars have focused on how to read these variants written for the *biwa hôshi* as narrative texts.

One fundamental problem faced by scholars examining orally recited texts is the nature of the extant works. Some researchers who have analyzed the surviving tradition of oral performances have doubts about analysis based on written texts, stressing the nontextual nature of performance. They argue that extant *Heike* texts do not constitute a record of oral performance. The relationship between oral performance and written text therefore continues to be a problematic subject of academic study. (For a comparison of views on orality and the *Heike* in Japanese, see the works of Hyôdô Hiromi [2000], Komoda Haruko, Matsuo Ashie [1996], and Yamashita Hiroaki [2000].)

One positive movement in scholarship is a focus on the relationships between individual *Heike* variants and their influence on other medieval and early modern narrative traditions. The individual recensions all narrate the same fundamental topic: the fall of the Taira clan and the establishment of

Yoritomo's shōgunate in Kamakura, far from the aristocratic capital. Their commonalities and differences point to the levels of significance of various concerns in the narration of this important historical moment. Moreover, the tale in turn gave birth to many other war tales and, importantly, other performing arts in addition to the variants of the *Heike* itself. Even today we can find oral legends associated with the historical sites where the Taira clan warriors were defeated in battle. The *Heike*, which became fixed in written form in the medieval period, thus provided an influence on oral traditions in areas where the narrative was collected. In this sense, it is a central focus for investigating the major problems connected with oral tradition, orality, literacy, and music in Japan.

*Aichi Shukutoku University*  
*Trans. by Elizabeth Oyler*

### References

- Bialock 1999 David T. Bialock. "Heike monogatari." In *Medieval Japanese Writers*. Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 203. Ed. by Steven D. Carter. Detroit, Washington, London: Gale Research. pp. 73-84.
- Hyôdô 2000 Hyôdô Hiromi. *Heike monogatari no rekishi to geinô* [*History and the Performing Arts in the Tale of the Heike*]. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kôbunkan.
- Matsuo 1996 Matsuo Ashie. *Gunki monogatari ronkû* [*Examination of the War Tales*]. Tokyo: Wakakusa Shobô.
- Ruch 1977 Barbara Ruch. "Medieval Jongleurs and the Making of a National Literature." In *Japan in the Muromachi Age*. Ed. by John W. Hall and Takeshi Toyoda. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 279-309.
- Rutledge 1993 Eric Rutledge. "Orality and Textual Variation in the Heike monogatari: Part One, The Phrase and its Formulaic Nature." In *Heike biwa: katari to ongaku* [*Heike Lute: Narrative and Music*]. Ed. by Kamisangô Yûkô. Kasukabe-shi: Hitsuji Shobô. pp. 360-40 [*sic*].
- Tokita and Komoda 2002 Alison Tokita and Komoda Haruko, eds. *Nihon no katarimono: kôtôsei, kôzô, igi* [*Japanese Narrative: The Tale of the Heike*]. Tokyo: Shûgakuin Shoten.

*Orality, Structure, Meaning*]. Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

Watson 2003

Michael Geoffrey Watson. "A Narrative Study of the Kakuichi-bon Heike Monogatari." D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University.

Yamashita 1976

Yamashita Hiroaki. "The Structure of 'Story-telling' (Katari) in Japanese War Tales with Special Reference to the Scene of Yoshitomo's Last Moments." *Acta Asiatica*, 37:47-69.

Yamashita 1994

\_\_\_\_\_. *Katari to shite no Heike monogatari* [*The Tale of the Heike as Narrative*]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

Yamashita 2000

\_\_\_\_\_. *Gunkigatari to geinô: hensha honkan shukan* [*Battle Narrative and the Performing Arts*]. Tokyo: Kyûko Shoin.