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A LITERATURE OF LOSS

STUDYING NARRATIVES OF EXILE IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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The COVID-19 shutdown struck my undergraduate World Literature I survey class right before we entered the medieval period. We were about to begin our study of selections from *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*. These two are the most famous of the *monogatari*, vernacular Japanese narratives that became popular during the late Heian and early Kamakura periods in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE.

As we were forced to an entirely online format, which none of the students had chosen and several of the less technically motivated were apprehensive about, I found myself rethinking my approach to material I have taught for more than two decades. Since many of our students are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and would have limited access to the Internet, I sought a form of delivery where they could access the material whenever they could and however they could. As some of my colleagues prepared to transition to synchronous video lectures modeled on the live classroom experience, we knew that some students would fall through the cracks if they were required to log in at a specific time. Even those with the necessary equipment and bandwidth were experiencing disruptions to their schedules. Many had family obligations or jobs that had been classified as

“essential services,” which often translated to irregular or even increased weekly hours.

With the campus computer labs closed, some students were limited to what they could receive on their phones, so I decided on a technologically retroactive direction: I composed new lessons, posting them to our learning management system¹ as plain HTML text with quick-to-load illustrations and, occasionally, links to short videos that wouldn’t consume too much of their cell provider’s allowance. But a text-based model would require more reading on top of a literature class that was already text-heavy, so I would have to be selective. I wanted to avoid simply replicating ideas that were available in our textbook’s introductory material² or on the Internet. My resolution to start from scratch required me to contemplate carefully what I would include and to build my online “lectures” on a single theme that would hold everything together in a logical way and guide the students through a literary tradition they knew very little about.

I quickly discovered that there would be no need to reinvent the wheel by making an attempt to cover the basic frameworks of two long works in their entirety, as I would ordinarily do in an introductory lecture. Short explanatory videos, ranging between three and eight minutes, are freely available on the web; the Khan Academy, for instance, provides visually exciting introductions to the Heian Japanese court culture that pervades *The Tale of Genji* and to the lead-up and outcome of the Genpei War that dominates the Heike epic. For the benefit of visual learners, I linked to a couple of these and composed brief explanatory notes suggesting elements one might look for as especially relevant to the assigned passages in the stories themselves. I kept in mind that the videos needed to be provided as extra enrichment—but not as extra credit, which would not have been equitable, since students with significant bandwidth restrictions would be limited to their textbook’s introductory material. I did, however, include a few screenshots from the videos alongside the text of my own web pages that followed, to provide continuity for those who had been able to get video access and to give a sense of visual context for those who had not. Additional illustrations that I provided to complement or clarify the background information, including *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, were available through Google image search.

The task at hand, then, was to find a thread on which to hang the lessons. For the pandemic version of our Japanese literature unit I opted to concentrate on the themes of loss, sudden change, and a confrontation with the transitory nature of what one has taken for granted—life events that all of the students, regardless of background, were struggling with.

The *Genji* and *Heike* narratives are permeated with the Buddhist concept of impermanence. One particular geographical spot is especially associated with the themes that I wanted to emphasize: the coast of Suma, near today’s city of

Kobe. Prince Genji's fall from grace in the capital and his subsequent exile to the Suma coast, combined with the added layer of tragedy after the pivotal Battle of Ichi-no-tani that occurred near the same spot some two hundred years later in the conflict recounted in *The Tale of the Heike*, is associated through centuries of Japanese literary history with nostalgia for a lost way of life. Genji was a fictional character invented by a Heian court lady over the course of several years at the dawn of the eleventh century; the battle that sealed the Heike clan's fate nearly two centuries later on March 20, 1184, was all too real. In both narratives, the episodes at Suma are significant dark intervals that occur within the context of complicated plotlines.

Once I had decided to build the unit primarily around a specific place, I made some changes to the syllabus. For *Genji*, I switched the assigned reading from my usual emphasis on the Shining Prince's early life in the capital city's palace to the events surrounding his exile, including an account that I had never assigned before of an impulsive affair with a woman from nearby Akashi, which had the resonance of a romance entered into at least partly on account of his sense of isolation—perhaps a cautionary tale, considering current circumstances.

The Tale of Genji tells us a lot about aristocratic values during an era when Japanese culture was at a peak, but it is not a very accessible book. Today, many of these values seem alien to modern readers. The intense emphasis on beauty in



Figure 1: This 1853 triptych woodblock print by the famous Edo *ukiyo-e* artist Utagawa Hiroshige depicts Prince Genji on the veranda of his home in exile at Suma. His impractically elegant clothing and hunched posture, turning his back on the prospect of Suma Bay, suggests his emotional rejection of the new world in which he has found himself. Rijksmuseum. Source: Wikimedia Commons: public domain.

all its forms, and the emotional intensity of Genji's many sexual conquests, make Lady Murasaki's protagonist very different from the action-oriented heroes we had studied in other long narratives such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Homeric poems, or even Valmiki's Hindu epic *Ramayana*. Yet it is possible to derive great joy from immersing oneself in this highly aestheticized bubble of a world, where there seems to be infinite time to devote to getting a poem just right or planning a future outing in a closed carriage to view the cherry blossoms in bloom. For those students who felt trapped in their homes, the ability to relate to this sense of infinite time was a new concept in their usually overcrowded schedules.

Like a darker echo of Genji's exile, the account of the Heike clan's flight from their family's palace complex at Fukuhara as they finally accept their refugee status is a touching account of a response to how a way of existence that they once accepted as natural is no longer possible for them. Unlike Genji, whose exile was temporary, they know that they can never return to the way things were before. They shelter amidst the decaying splendor of the palace buildings for one last night, then set it all on fire to keep their home from falling into enemy hands, a striking example of the stark difference between the beautiful bubble-world of Genji and this "new normal" of violence and destruction. Before the shutdown, we had studied the Fire Sermon of the Buddha, which explains that "everything is on fire" because the things of this world are transitory. I am not sure the students fully grasped the analogy until this point in the class.

When it came to deciding which elements to discard and which to keep in *The Tale of the Heike*, I chose to go deep rather than broad in the account of the war and focus more on the resonances of the Ichi-no-tani battle. Usually, my class looks at a chain of martial events in a cause-and-effect sequence, but the thematic focus enabled me to introduce them to adaptations of selected episodes in other traditional Japanese genres.

One of the most dramatic incidents amidst the fighting is a scene involving Atsumori, a doomed warrior of about sixteen, just a couple of years younger than some of the students themselves, who bravely takes a final stand on the beach in the face of certain death. The enemy soldier who has him cornered realizes that the youth reminds him of his own son, but with the battle lines advancing toward them he has no option but to offer Atsumori an honorable death.

The *Heike* text reports simply that the exchange so affected the soldier that he later gave up his arms and became a monk. About 200 years later, the Nō master Zeami Motokiyo composed one of his great masterpieces, *Atsumori*, which imagined an encounter between the soldier/monk and young Atsumori's ghost.³ Unlike other Nō ghost dramas, which often feature a monk exorcising a hungry spirit whom he runs across in his travels, this one dives deeper since the monk was the actual instrument of the ghost's demise. The two exorcise each other; the



Figure 2: Another Hiroshige print, dated sometime between 1835 and 1839, portrays the final moments of the young Heike warrior Atsumori. Enemy warriors have overcome the Heike camp at Ichi-no-tani and can be seen advancing toward the beach in the upper left corner of the picture.

Minneapolis Institute of Art: public domain.

inability of Atsumori's spirit to rest is grounded in his inability to come to terms with the manner of his premature death, and the warrior-monk is haunted by a burden of guilt that keeps him from enlightenment. When forgiveness is reached, both of their spirits are released. The structure of mutual liberation echoes a similar exchange between two Buddhist nuns who enable each other to let go of worldly attachment in the opening chapter of *The Tale of the Heike*, "The Bells of Gion Monastery."

Although the period is outside the inclusive dates of our World Literature I survey, I also cited a haiku from the seventeenth-century Edo poet Bashō's *Backpack Notes*, as translated by Haruo Shirane: "Octopus traps— / fleeting dreams / under the summer moon." The summer moon, a traditional seasonal image, connotes the ephemerality associated with fleeting summer nights. The poem was composed while Bashō was lodging at Akashi; introducing the vernacular image of the octopus trap, he juxtaposes a seemingly peaceful modern scene with an implicit suggestion of the Heike warriors, caught between Suma Bay and a hostile army, who were massacred along the same shoreline half a millennium earlier. Just as the unwitting octopus crawls into a snug space that seems like a safe haven, the

Heike army's illusion of an unassailable position of security on a narrow stretch of land between a mountain and the open sea was overturned when their enemies discovered a pass on the mountainside and cut them off.⁴

Two more short works could be added seamlessly to the study of the *Genji* and *Heike* texts since the connections are obvious. For instance, Kamo no Chōmei wrote his moving *Hōjōki* (usually translated as “An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut”) in the year 1212, as the civil war described in *The Tale of the Heike* raged throughout Japan.⁵ Although he does not directly address the fighting, the author reflects upon its impact as magnified by natural disasters: a citywide fire that devastated the capital in 1177, followed by a destructive whirlwind and a death-dealing earthquake, the sudden displacement as the capital was unexpectedly moved from its traditional center in Kyoto to Fukuohara, and widespread famine, events that combined to attract him to a hermit's life similar to that pursued by the women who retreat to a comparable hermitage in the *Heike* narrative's first episode. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's brilliant short story “Rashōmon” (which bears little resemblance to Kurosawa's famous film, except in selected visual references), while written in 1915, is set in the same time period and echoes the details mentioned by Kamo no Chōmei as it imagines one man's moral crisis in the midst of society's breakdown.⁶

Hōjōki is only about fifteen pages in length and “Rashōmon” is less than ten. Both accounts contain exciting material that reads quickly and could promote further conversation about their underlying themes of impermanence and uprootedness and their use of common Buddhist symbolism to emphasize those themes.

The choice of central and supporting texts might have differed if I had not been working from an existing syllabus, a factor I might consider if circumstances suggest an iteration of the Japanese “literature of loss” unit. Many of Japan's canonical works are inclined toward this theme in the first place, so the instructor can choose which sources are most likely to appeal to a given group of students. Some to consider include the “love suicide” puppet plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon, which provide an Edo-era contrast to the aristocratic monogatari with a concentration on working-class heroism undergirded by the rise of the more egalitarian faith of Pure Land Buddhism; many of Ichiyō Higuchi's Meiji-era short stories, especially if taught in combination with selections from her diary, which grounds her characters in precursors from episodes in *The Tale of Genji* or *The Tale of the Heike*; and Mishima Yukio's hauntingly tragic short story “Patriotism,” based on events surrounding the failed coup d'état by a coalition of young army officers in 1936.⁷ One might also examine human responses to crises peculiar to the modern era, such as Keiji Nakazawa's manga series (adapted as a film in 1976, with a more popular anime version following in 1983) *Barefoot Gen*, whose six-

year-old protagonist survives the bombing of Hiroshima and its chaotic aftermath.

My reconfiguring of the World Literature I syllabus produced a different kind of story, certainly a darker story than previous years when I had emphasized more Confucian elements, such as the political world of the court and the clever ploys of the victorious generals. But it sustained student engagement in an otherwise distracting situation and, perhaps, was one that seemed a little less isolating in the face of this evidence that the sense of displacement we are all experiencing now is not unique to our own time and place.

Notes

¹Our university's LMS is D2L ("Desire to Learn"). Other platforms, such as Blackboard or Canvas, would be equally suitable for this format.

²This semester, our class used the second edition of David Damrosch et al., ed., *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009). The introductory essays and footnotes are excellent, and the selection of excerpts and entire works is well planned. I did, however, have to extend into some additional scanned pages from other editions of the two works we were studying so I could get exactly the passages I wanted to emphasize. I posted them to our D2L website along with the HTML pages I had composed to accompany them.

³Nō scripts are not very long, and this one is in our textbook, so I added Zeami's play along with an optional video clip of a scene in performance to demonstrate how *The Tale of the Heike* fired later imaginations.

⁴If I had wanted to dig yet deeper, I might have included an alternative version of the Atsumori episode from Namiki Sōsuke's 1751 puppet play, *Chronicle of the Battle of Ichinotani*, which can be found in Shirane's *Early Modern Japanese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 410. That seemed a bridge too far for this particular class, so I merely mentioned it as a possibility for further exploration.

⁵Kamo no Chōmei's essay is not included in the *Longman Anthology*, which would have made it an easy add-on for my class. There is, however, an excellent annotated translation of it in the popular *Norton Anthology of World Literature* and several good translations of it can be readily found on the Internet and linked to.

⁶As a twentieth-century work, "Rashōmon" is found in the second volume of the *Longman Anthology*, which my students did not have, but this work too is readily available on the Internet. I teach this story regularly in the second semester of my World Literature survey, and it is one of the most popular things we read. I assign it early in the semester, generally within the first two weeks, and I've found it to be a reliable icebreaker for the students' first set of reading journals. Its moral ambiguity easily cuts through their initial reticence to open up in the first class discussions at the beginning of a new term. The protagonist, a samurai's servant who has just lost everything in the wake of his master's ruin, is a victim of circumstances beyond his control that have upended the comfortable assumptions he had lived by up to that point.

⁷The most famous of Chikamatsu's "love suicides" (*Shinju*) plays is his 1721 masterpiece, *The Love Suicides at Amijima*. I have had better luck teaching the less sophisticated *Love Suicides at Sonezaki* from 1703, a much shorter one-act play that can be easily read and comprehended in one sitting. Although it lacks the brilliance of the longer drama, it features the same star-crossed theme and has appeal as a ripped-from-the-headlines adaptation of a real incident that had occurred just a few months earlier. Both plays reflect sweeping cultural change in their approach to one's duty to society and to religion.