

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Hojoki, Visions of a Torn World

By Kamo-no-Chomei  
Yasuhiko Moriguchi and David Jenkins, Translators

Michael Hofmann, Illustrator

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91 PAGES

This new translation of the *Hōjōki* available as a handsomely published, separate volume, is a welcome addition to the earlier Keene and Sadler versions. The new work comes complete with endnotes and an informative introduction elucidating the poetics of the text, the historical upheavals of late Heian and early Kamakura politics, as well as some fundamentals regarding the emerging egalitarianism within Mahayana Buddhism.

The *Hōjōki* (often translated as *An Account of My Hut*) was written in 1212 by the Buddhist monk, Kamo-no-Chōmei, and describes a series of social and natural calamities surrounding the fall of Heian court rule and the rise of the shogunate military classes. Mention of the great clash between the aristocratic Heike and the warrior Genji clans in the late twelfth century is conspicuously absent, but much significance is accorded the moving of the capital in 1180, and the subsequent abandonment of urban culture. Add to this the onslaught of natural disasters—fires, earthquakes, whirlwinds, droughts—and it is clear that Chōmei believed he was witnessing the “last days” within Buddhist eschatology known as *mappo*.

However, part of the period’s decline was personal, as Chōmei, a recognized, published poet with court rank, was overlooked for promotion due to political intrigues. Not succeeding his father as a high administrator of one of the prestigious Kamo shrines, Chōmei withdrew from public life to retire in various huts in the countryside.

In my courses, I find that students are generally fascinated with medieval Buddhism and the notion of a religious awakening, following the aftermath of war and natural calamities at the end of the Heian period. After reading *The Tale of Genji* and *Tale of the Heike*, students interpret the powerful imagery and symbolism of the *Hōjōki* in order to understand the theological reforms of the Kamakura period; for example, how are the earlier stock images of court romance, such as “sleeves wet with dew,” increasingly imbued with Buddhist overtones?

Since the *Hōjōki* is well structured, students also segment the text, categorizing the disasters, and analyzing how the fluctuations of both social station and physical well being reflect notions of the ephemeral. Key images can be explored to understand how aesthetic, theological and political meanings resonate through common metaphors; for example, “house” signifies various



meanings, including abode, political institutions, or the bodily frame of the self.

Although the *Hōjōki* falls into the category of recluse literature, it is worth questioning whether Chōmei’s experience of the rural world really was set apart from the urban culture of the capital. Like other monk-poets such as Saigyō, Chōmei seems remarkably connected to his urban contacts; indeed, there remains the possibility that, as with the Heian courtiers, the rural was, among other things, a poetic trope. That is to say,

regardless of how real or fictive these huts were, Chōmei’s experience of “hutness” was undoubtedly framed by aesthetic categories that reflected an urban, literary sensibility. Certainly, as Chōmei admits, the hut’s spiritual meaning is itself fraught with contradiction: to not desire the trappings of the material world was, in the end, a powerful desire as well.

The status of poetry in translations of premodern texts remains problematic, since it is prominent, yet not as versification, i.e., lines and stanzas. Since the *Hōjōki* uses shifting rhythms, not exactly like *waka*, but definitely poetic prose, the prose essay versions of former translations tended to overlook the rhythmic quality clearly present in the text, particularly in the famous introductory section. I have no solution for this, but I note that while these translators have captured the rhythmic impulse, they also sustained a line-by-line, verse and stanza format which creates a somewhat artificial, poem-like semblance not found in the original. Because modern prose narratives suppress the poetic figuration of their texts, I consider this “poetic” version of the *Hōjōki* a kind of victory, but it needs stating that presenting the *Hōjōki* in a versified format also limits what poetic content in premodern texts means.

Finally, since I consider it important to juxtapose contemporary issues when reading classic works, I find that Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film, *Rashōmon*—also situated in the chaos of the waning days of late Heian society—works well in posing ethical questions regarding war guilt, narrative, and memory. As in the *Hōjōki*, beggars tear timber from temples for firewood, echoing actual conditions in the dire postwar period, as well as confronting contemporary writers and readers of disaster with the ethical choices present when we remember and recount tragedy. ■

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