

JAPANESE POETRY – Postclassical Period

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

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Part I : CLASSICAL PERIOD

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.

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.

*oki mo sezu
ne mo sede yoru wo
akashite wa
haru no mono tote
nagamekurashitsu*

Having passed the night
Neither waking nor sleeping,
I have spent the day
Brooding and watching the rain—
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
koshiki toki wa
nubatama no
yoru no koromo wo
kaeshite zo kiru*

When carried away
By passionate desire
I wear my bedclothes inside out—
Dark as the darkest
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.

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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 : MEDIEVAL POETRY

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.

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 *Shinkokinshû* by the renowned poet-priest Saigyô:

<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 yûgure</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 yûgure</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 *Shinkokinshû* 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.

<i>Hokku:</i>	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 Yōsai, of Priest Saigyō, together with a representative *waka*. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



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