

Japanese Noh and Heike *katari*

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Although literature specialists tend to classify Noh and Heike *katari* differently (Noh with a representational dimension that renders it more a hybrid), a student of oral tradition will find in them many common elements. Central to both is narrative recitation and a commitment to the expressive potential of the voice. Both show oral traditional characteristics, but early on, both also assigned a central role to libretti that performers work from. The co-presence of chanting and instrumentation is another defining characteristic. Heike *katari* have been traditionally performed by blind minstrels, who accompany their own solo recitations on the *biwa* (lute). Noh actors have performed to an instrumental ensemble of drums and flute. Both of these arts, which continue to be practiced today (Noh more widespread than Heike *katari*), rely on audience foreknowledge of traditional materials, making them both potential resources for examining how performances may be “re-keyed” over time to adjust to changing reception.

In Japan, the field in which the most work has been done on Noh and on Heike *katari* respectively is known as *kokubungaku*, “national literature.” *Kokubungaku* specialists, whose philological contributions have been invaluable, have tended to concentrate on the transmission of texts as such, and on the accurate exegesis of those texts. Since such textual study has its own rigors, perhaps it is not surprising that few specialists have ventured into comparative work. The idea that the examination of Noh, Heike *katari*, or related narrative arts in terms of their media and processes of performance might inform our understanding of these arts has gained momentum only in the last decade. One reflection of this trend is that at least two major *kokubungaku* journals in the last four years have devoted entire issues to the significance of music and the human voice across a range of religious and entertainment-oriented arenas for performance in traditional Japan.¹

¹ *Chûsei bungaku (Medieval Literature)* published an issue titled “Oto to koe no chûsei bungaku” (“Sound and Voice in Medieval Literature” [vol. 46, June 2001]). Also,

There has also emerged a more interdisciplinary group of scholars from *kokubungaku*, ethnomusicology, and folklore studies (*minzokugaku*) with interests in a comparative approach that takes the field of oral tradition studies into account. One major contribution to this approach is a two-volume collection of essays on “orally transmitted literature” (*kôshô bungaku*), published in 1997.² The opening essay of volume 1, by Hyôdô Hiromi, provides an overview of oral tradition studies, briefly introducing the findings of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and touching even more lightly on contemporary work, such that of John Miles Foley. Each of the remaining essays in volume 1 introduces a traditional art of performance and its patterns of transmission, with an emphasis on its local contexts. To borrow Hyôdô’s term, all the better to understand “*ooraru na pafuoomansu*” (“oral performance”)!³

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an issue entitled “Ongaku: koe to oto no porifuonii” (“Music: Polyphony of Voice and Sound”) was published in *Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kyôzai no kenkyû* (*The National Literature: Research on Interpretation and Learning Materials* [vol. 44, issue 13, November 1999]).

² “Kôshô bungaku” (“Orally Transmitted Literature”) 1 and 2; see also *Iwanami kôza Nihon bungakushi* (“Iwanami’s Collected Writings on the History of Japanese Literature”), vols. 16 and 17 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1997).

³ “Oral performance.” See *Iwanami kôza Nihon bungakushi*, vol. 16, p. 32.

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