



ISSN 1076-9005  
Volume 4 1997: 84-88  
Publication date: 21 January 1997

*Hōjōki: Visions of a Torn World* by Kamo-no-Chōmei. Trans. Yasuhiko Moriguchi and David Jenkins, with illustrations by Michael Hofmann. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996. Pp. 93. ISBN 1-8806-5622-1 (paperback), \$9.95.

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An image of the sublime loneliness of falling cherry blossoms serves as a reminder of the truth that amidst the fragile structures of our fleeting world profound beauty can nonetheless be witnessed; beauty made poignant not in spite of but on account of its commingling with fragility. Such reflections as these are often touted as the heart of a medieval Japanese aesthetic consciousness that raised an awareness of *mujō* (impermanence) to artistic heights. This consciousness is often said to be captured by the term *mono no aware*, which has been translated as “the pathos of things” or “the ability to be deeply moved by things.” The term encompasses both objective (*mono*) and the subjective (*aware*) aspects of experience, and is in a sense a reference to the overpowering encounter with ultimate reality, emptiness or thusness that can take place only because of our grounding in an impermanent world of conditioned existence. Examples of famous passages adumbrating such a theme include the opening line from *The Tale of the Heike*, “the sound of the Gion Shōja bell echoes the impermanence of all things,” the poet Bashō’s memorable *haiku*, “an ancient pond, a frog leaps in, the sound of water,” and perhaps the first lines from Kamo no Chōmei’s *Account of My Hermitage*, “the waters of a flowing stream are ever present but never the same; the bubbles in a quiet pool disappear and form but never endure for long. So it is with men and their dwellings in the world.”

This last citation is from Chōmei’s (1155–1216) *Hōjōki*, the newest translation of which is under review here. Of course, expressions in medieval Japanese literature of the theme of the aesthetics of impermanence can at times appear hackneyed and some elements of Chōmei’s work indeed fit this bill. Nonetheless, the work has earned its classic status for other features as well, such as its frankness and economy of expression and its capacity to rise above cliché to a perspective that approaches self-parody. It is the brief story of a man’s journey at the turn of the thirteenth century—a time of great social and cultural turmoil in Japan marked by the rise of samurai rulers and the emergence of new popular forms of Buddhism—a journey from the relative comforts of urban aristocratic life in Kyoto to a solitary retreat into a small hut in the nearby mountains. The story is imbued with a tone of pessimism characteristic of the age; it is a personal tale of renunciation: “Sometimes I go to the capital and am aware I look like a begging monk. But when I return I pity those who seek the dross of the world.” Chōmei is as candid about his embarrassment at his mendicant appearance (he had once been a distinguished poet who mixed with the finest in the city) as he is about his reluctance to rejoin that former world. A key appeal of the work lies in its clear depiction of the features of these two worlds. One is the tangled and unreliable one he abandons and pities (com-

plete with vivid descriptions of a catastrophic fire, earthquake and epidemic), and the other the simple and satisfying one he cherishes (“My clothes are arrowroot, my bedding hemp. I make do with what I find . . .”). Another appeal is to be found in its honest portrayal at the end of the work of the inner struggles of its author to come to grips with the other-worldly attachment he has toward his quietistic life. It appears that Chōmei’s taking the tonsure and retreating to the hills may have been motivated in part by his failure to secure a desirable position as a chief administrator of an important shrine in Kyoto, and it is possible to see in some of his language a “sour grapes” attitude toward the city life he has forsaken. Indeed, the passages in the text that register as trite appear to hover in this modality. And yet, Chōmei is keen enough to witness his inner complexities and even admits in the final section that they can torment him: “You left the world to live in the woods, to quiet your mind and live the Holy Way. But though you appear to be a monk your heart is soaked in sin . . . Is your lowly life—surely a consequence of past deeds—troubling you now? Has your discerning mind just served to drive you mad?”

*Hōjōki* has been translated before into English, with notable examples found in Donald Keene’s *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (Tuttle, 1954) and Helen McCullough’s *Classical Japanese Prose* (Stanford University, 1990). This new translation by Yamaguchi and Jenkins (who have cotranslated two other works of medieval Japanese literature) differs primarily in that it is a single volume and that it is done in verse rather than prose. Being available as an affordable book, Chōmei’s work may now rightfully receive attention from a wider audience. But one cannot avoid the suspicion that it was precisely the decision to render the translation in verse that enabled it to become a book, for neither of the prose versions noted above take up more than fifteen pages. This translation manages, with wide margins and abundant spacing, to cover a total of seventy-eight pages of text including introduction, illustrations and glossary. It is in general a pleasure to read as Chōmei is deft at turning a memorable phrase and his frank autobiographical style smoothly unites social commentary, philosophy and transparent self-reflection: “Many troubles flow from your status, social rank . . . The poor man who lives near the rich is shamed by shabbiness . . . He sees the envy of his wife, children, servants . . . Men of means have much to fear. Those with none know only bitterness . . . If you conform to the world it will bind you hand and foot. If you do not, then it will think you mad. And so the question, where should we live. And how? . . . And how bring even short-lived peace to our hearts?”

The overall effect would be even more successful if the poetry were itself exquisite, but I personally feel the text works better in the earlier

prose renderings. One can only wonder what is gained by putting, for example, the lines just quoted into verse form, one sentence per verse broken into three or more lines per sentence. The occasional watercolor illustrations, on eight pages throughout the text, although fine in their own right, also fail to enliven or enlarge the work. I could not help but feel while reading that Chōmei deserves better.

There are other shortcomings, too. Although the fifteen-page introduction provides a helpful biography of Chōmei and some good insights into some nuances of the text, it seems also to say both too much and too little. While on the one hand there is an unnecessary foray into Ezra Pound's technical vocabulary as well as a questionable concluding remark about how Chōmei's work reveals "the true saintliness of this great man," on the other is a lamentable omission of any reference to the strong resonances in the text of classical Taoist literature (both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu) as well as to the significance of the title itself, which derives from the name of the famous small dwelling (*hōjō*) of the great bodhisattva protagonist of one of the best-loved Mahāyāna scriptures, Vimalakīrti. Vimalakīrti was noted for remarkably possessing all the wisdom and skillful means of a Buddha in spite of his being a layman. Since it is precisely the precarious boundaries in Chōmei's own life between the status of the lay and the renunciate (he judges himself to be a monk with an impure mind, while Vimalakīrti was clearly a layman saint) that are the themes of the work, the figure of Vimalakīrti deserves more mention than the endnote on page 91 saying he "was an enlightened disciple of the Buddha who lived in a small room." Other minor flaws include in the notes the misspelling of Śākyamuni and Mañjuśrī (86, 87) and the failure to name Genshin as the author of the important *ōjōyōshū* (87).

In summary, one may conclude that, like some of the slightly smaller pocket volumes of great works from both East and West that appear atop bookstore counters, this new publication is to be welcomed for making a valuable text more accessible to a general audience. While I doubt, however, that it will find a lasting place in many college syllabi, perhaps it will serve to stimulate someone to produce, for example, a volume including a translation of the *Hōjōki* together with other works of a like genre. Helen McCullough's translation noted above comes in a section of her book instructively entitled "Medieval Recluse-Memoirists" that includes part of Yoshida Kenkō's *Essays in Idleness*. One might consider adding some of the wonderful poetry of Saigyō, who was thirty-seven years Chōmei's senior, and perhaps Matsuo Bashō's much later piece on his own little hut (and life), prose poem on the *Unreal Dwelling*. Such a longer volume would permit a more thorough treatment of the neglected themes mentioned above,

as well as other possible topics such as the struggle among “renunciate literati” like Chōmei to eke out a middle way between a disdain for the vanity of the world (connoted by the Japanese word for impermanence, *mujō*) and a subtle pride in the eremitic aroma of their own hard-earned aloofness.