

**BETWEEN THE COURT AND THE BATTLEFIELD: SAMURAI WOMEN IN
THE *TALE OF THE HEIKE***

**ENTRE A CORTE E O CAMPO DE BATALHA: MULHERES SAMURAI NO
*CONTO DO HEIKE***

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ABSTRACT: The *Heike monogatari* (the *Tale of the Heike*, fourteenth century) recounts the fall of the Heike, a military clan also known as Taira, at the end of the Genpei War (1180-1185). In it, there are features dozens of female characters. This essay examines the representation of a number of women of warrior backgrounds in the *Heike monogatari*. The aim is to present the sense of the world of the Heike women, their relationship with other characters, male and female, and their function in the story.

Keywords: *The tale of the Heike*; Female characters; Medieval Japanese military tales.

RESUMO: O *Heike monogatari* (*Conto do Heike*, século XIV) relata a queda do Heike, um clã militar também conhecido como Taira, no final da Guerra de Genpei (1180-1185). Nele há dezenas de personagens femininas. Este ensaio examina a representação de uma série de mulheres de origem guerreira no *Heike monogatari*. O objetivo é apresentar o sentido do mundo das mulheres Heike, seu relacionamento com outros personagens, masculinos e femininos, e sua função no enredo.

Palavras-chave: *Conto do Heike*; Personagens femininas; Contos militares japoneses medievais.

The *Heike monogatari* (the *Tale of the Heike*, fourteenth century) recounts the fall of the Heike, a military clan also known as Taira, at the end of the Genpei War (1180-1185)². It features dozens of female characters. This may seem rather surprising, considering that the main plot is primarily a matter of enmities between men, between the Taira and the victors who defeated them, the Minamoto, also known as Genji.

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² Here I will use primarily the *Kakuichi* variant of *Heike monogatari*. The text is in Tomikura (1966-1968). Complete English translations can be found in McCullough (1988) and Tyler (2012).

With a few exceptions, the women of the *Heike monogatari* do not take part in battles. They more often take supporting roles, being for the most part only obliquely involved in the main plot of the tale. Yet their stories are numerous, compelling, and found throughout the text. It is a woman called Kenreimon'in, the last surviving member of the Taira family, who is left at the end to pray for the dead, to make sense of what happened, and, by recounting the events to us through the narrative of the *Heike* itself, to make sure that they will not be forgotten by future generations.

In this essay I will look at the representation of a number of women of warrior backgrounds in the *Heike monogatari*. I will not attempt to evaluate how realistically they are represented. Rather, the aim is to convey a sense of the world of the *Heike* women, their relationship with other characters, male and female, and their function in the story.

The authors of the group of textual variants we call the *Heike monogatari* were born generations after the events described in the tale. We should therefore keep in mind that all the characters who appear in it, were imagined by male authors who narrated the story at a later time according to their own perceptions of historical reality, their own political agendas, and their own artistic interests and goals. Nevertheless, these characters are not unrealistically drawn. They are not obviously anachronistic, not wholly separated from the world of twelfth-century Japan. The men and women who appear in the *Heike monogatari*, historical or fictional, are generally credible. There is no huge divergence between the representation of women in the *Heike monogatari* and what we know about them from other sources.

Why are women so numerous in the *Heike monogatari*? The *Heike* is not just the story of the fall of the Taira military clan narrated through a chronicle of battles. It is also, and especially, the story of the fall of the individual members of this clan, and of the disappearance of the world of the Heian court of which many of these men and women had been part. The theme of the destruction of the Taira and the account's numerous subplots ultimately illustrate the meaning of impermanence. The stories of the *Tale of the Heike* are stories not only of war, but also of friendship, love, and family; women naturally occupy a central part in them. Furthermore, women characters contribute significantly to the appeal of the story. Descriptions of their beauty and of their singing and dancing performances, narration of their passionate reactions to events, and transcriptions of the poems they compose can be found everywhere in the *Heike*.

Chūsei no onna

If we compare female characters in medieval Japanese military tales with those in Heian-period tales such as the *Genji monogatari* (the Tale of Genji, eleventh century), several major changes in the representation of women are immediately clear.

At least superficially, *Heike* women seem to have much in common with the female protagonists of the *Genji*. They are lovers, wives, mothers. Many inhabit a court environment like the one depicted in the *Genji*. Yet there is a major difference: *Heike* women possess a dynamism, a concreteness, and an agency rarely seen in the female characters of earlier Japanese literature. Even

when subject to male authority, *Heike* women are strong, alive, and ready to take action. When they lack the power to control their destiny directly, they enact strategies that enable them to obtain what they want, or to set themselves free from unwanted authority. Freeing themselves from temporal authority by taking Buddhist vows can be seen as an example of this.³ Faced with no alternative, they are not afraid to sacrifice their lives. If they have children, they drag them along in an impossible escape or drown with them, as we will see Niidono do with her grandchild Emperor Antoku. When children do not obey, the women cry, scream, or threaten to kill themselves. They are, to use a term favored by some Japanese scholars, *chūsei no onna*, “medieval women.” *Chūsei no onna* does not necessarily refer to the protagonists of stories set in *chūsei*. Instead, the term refers to female characters created or developed by authors who themselves lived and wrote in medieval Japan⁴.

Where do *chūsei no onna* come from? The creation of such assertive female characters may be one of the tangible consequences of the development, during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) of the *ie* (a family based on a couple and their offspring living together) especially among warrior families.⁵ According to scholars such as Wakita Haruko, the *ie* system resulted in the empowerment of women. The wife of a powerful man exercised direct control over family affairs, especially in cases when the husband was often away from home. This control included management of the house and the family assets; supervision of the (male and female) servants and employees connected to the household; and authority regarding the rearing of offspring. In short, wives became the most powerful people in the house after their husbands.

Unlike the women depicted in Heian literature, most of the women in warrior tales do in fact look at life from the perspective of their household’s second-in-command rather than as decorative fixtures waiting for the men around them to take decisions. By this I do not intend to say that *Heike* women are all strong and active, in contrast to typically weak and passive *Genji* women; as we quickly survey the women of the *Heike*, we will see that there are many exceptions to this rule. There are women who lack agency in the *Heike* as well. Yet most wield some authority and are aware of the positions of responsibility they occupy.

To be sure, regardless of how assertive and independent a female *Heike* character may be, her story is always attached to the story of a more important male protagonist. The warrior Tomoe is connected to her lord Kiso no Yoshinaka, Shizuka the *shirabyōshi* dancer is attached to Minamoto no Yoshitsune, Giō and Hotoke to Taira no Kiyomori, and so forth⁶.

³ On becoming a nun in premodern Japan, see Ruch (2002).

⁴ See, for example, Komatsu (1991). These women are called *chūsei no onna* (or *chūsei onna*) because they appear especially in medieval works, but not all of the women appearing in medieval literature necessarily fit this description. I will adopt this terminology for the sake of convenience, despite the fact that some scholars (including those of the 1960s who used the term before the development of gender studies) may have had a different definition in mind.

⁵ The *ie* system contrasts with the matrilineal arrangement common among privileged social classes in the Heian period, according to which women were domiciled in their ancestral homes. See Wakita (1992).

⁶ The case of Tomoe will be examined later in this essay. On Shizuka, see Naitō (2004); on Giō and Hotoke, see Strippoli (2018).

Men determine the position of these women. The women rarely hold authority of their own. Yet for the most part these female characters are not simply named after their male counterparts: they are not just “so-and-so’s wife” or “someone’s daughter,” as Japanese historical documents refer to them. In the *Heike monogatari*, significant women characters are generally identified by their own names. Kozaishō, who commits suicide after learning about the death of her husband Taira no Michimori, is one of them. She would not be included in the *Tale of the Heike* if she were not Michimori’s wife, yet the narrative recognizes her with her own name and a detailed account of the facts of her youth.

Chūsei no onna do not appear exclusively in military tales. They are found for example in *otogizōshi*, short stories that assumed a written form mostly during the Muromachi period (1336-1573). In *otogizōshi* these lively women generally belong to the lower classes, such as the wife of the aspiring king of farts in *Fukutomi chōja monogatari*⁷ or the “errand nun” in *Oyō no ama* – the former famous for her aggressiveness and the latter for her subtle powers of deception.⁸ The vengeful woman in *Dōjōji engi emaki* enjoys higher status – as she is the daughter-in-law of a steward – with people in her service. She becomes infuriated after realizing that the good-looking monk to whom she is attracted has no intention of responding to her advances. She turns into a snake and burns him to a crisp by wrapping her serpentine body around the bell inside which the monk is hiding.⁹

The social backgrounds of the *chūsei no onna* in the *Heike* are also very varied. They range from the daughters of brothel keepers and *shirabyōshi* entertainers to warriors, court ladies, and the wives and mothers of emperors. In the discussion that follows, I shall explore the lives and roles in the *Heike* of women belonging to warrior families. In the era during which the Taira were powerful in Kyoto, these women engaged with court government in many ways. They were intimate with the aristocrats they supposedly served. They embraced their culture and lifestyle, cultivating arts such as the love of poetry. They sometimes succeeded in marrying their daughters into the imperial court.¹⁰ The categories I have mentioned are not completely separated; there is some overlap. Whenever known, I will include the birth and death dates of these women.

Women on the Battlefield: Tomoe the Warrior

I begin my exploration of *Heike monogatari* warrior women with Tomoe, an exceptional character that has both puzzled and excited the imagination of *Heike* readers – particularly in recent times, when interest in gender identity has intensified both in and out of academia.

⁷ Text in Nishizawa (1978, p. 120-140). Translations in Skord (1991, p. 157-167 – English) and Strippoli (2001, p. 79-90 – Italian).

⁸ Text in Ichiko Teiji and Noma Kōshin (1976, p. 51-91). Translation in Skord (1991, p. 205-220 – English), and Strippoli (2001, p. 111-127 – Italian).

⁹ Text in Kuwahara (1982, p. 37-67). Translation in Skord (1997 – English) and Strippoli (2001, p. 153-160 – Italian).

¹⁰ On warriors as courtiers in the Heian period, see Varley (1997).

Tomoe is not the wife of a warrior, but a warrior herself. She is in the service of an important Minamoto general, Kiso no Yoshinaka. In the manuscript's ninth scroll we see her take part in Yoshinaka's last battle. Although she is the only woman warrior whose story is described in detail, Tomoe is not the only such character in the *Heike monogatari*. Another, Yamabuki, is said to be in the service of the same lord, but is not present at Yoshinaka's final battle because she has fallen ill and cannot leave the capital. A *Heike* variant called *Genpei jōsuiki* (also read *Genpei seisuiki*) mentions a certain Aoi, also a Yoshinaka retainer, who has earlier been killed in combat.

Tomoe (or Tomoe Gozen, Lady Tomoe, as later sources refer to her) is described in various versions of the *Heike* as a beautiful woman with fair skin, long hair, and charming features. Her military skills are impressive: she is said to be a strong archer and a brave swordswoman "worth a thousand warriors," able even to ride unbroken horses. The scholar Hosokawa Ryōichi mentions other *dairiki no onna* (women of unusual physical strength) whose legends were known in medieval Japan, but concludes that a character that like Tomoe who brings together masculine attributes (strength and military skills) with feminine beauty and grace is unique in the premodern Japanese tradition¹¹.

When Yoshinaka's forces are outnumbered and the battle is clearly lost, the lord orders Tomoe to flee, because he does not want people to say that he had a woman next to him during his last battle. Even if Tomoe is far more valourous than most warriors, being a woman prevents her from fulfilling the most important duty of a medieval warrior: to die at her master's side, as Yoshinaka's male retainer Imai Kanehira does, proudly throwing himself on his sword after Yoshinaka is killed. While the idea that it would be dishonorable to die next to a woman might make sense on a superficial level, this explanation for Tomoe's expulsion from the battlefield is not entirely convincing. If it were true, Yoshinaka would not have brought Tomoe with him in the first place. Steven Brown, who examines the possible reasons behind Yoshinaka's decision, explores other versions of the *Heike monogatari*, including *Genpei jōsuiki*, where Yoshinaka instructs Tomoe to go back to his land and tell his family about his fate, which would otherwise remain unknown (BROWN, 1998, p. 187-191). According to *Genpei jōsuiki*, Tomoe does in fact go back to Shinano to report the results of the battle to Yoshinaka's wife.

Another explanation for Tomoe's dismissal, I would argue, is that it provides the *Heike* storytellers with the opportunity to show her perform an act of heroism. Reluctant to leave, Tomoe decides to engage in a last duel as an homage to her lord. After finding a worthy foe, a warrior renowned for his strength, she seizes him, cuts off his head, and throws it away. She then discards her helmet and armor and flees towards the east. What happens to her afterwards is unclear and changes depending on the source? She may have not fled at all. She may have died on the field, as hinted in the *Heike* variant *Engyōbon* (HOSOKAWA, 1998, p. 19). She may have taken Buddhist vows and lived until age 91. She may have committed suicide. She may have become a traveling entertainer (BROWN, 1998, p. 191-199). Her legend is enriched by a fourteenth-century *noh* with the same title, a *shuramono* (warrior play) in

¹¹ For a discussion on the origins and the development of Tomoe's legend see Hosokawa (1994, p. 7-53). See also Tyler (1991) and Brown (1998).

which her ghost appears to monks and asks to be pacified like the souls of her male warrior counterparts slain in the Genpei War.¹²

Tomoe is on the one hand not different from her fellow warriors. She is sent as a general into many battles; is ready, like all good warriors, to die for her master; and continuously puts her life at risk. The customs of war forbade the killing of women, but Tomoe is treated like the other fighters. Her enemies try to take her head. Only when Yoshinaka sends her away does she acquire the function shared by many *Heike monogatari* women: to remember what happened, to pass that knowledge on to others, and to pray for the dead.

How realistic is Tomoe's character? No historical records mention her. Many believe she is an invented character. But could someone like Tomoe have existed? Examples of women warriors (who usually dress as men) are common to many traditions. Moreover, women carrying a weapon such as the *naginata* (halberd or glaive) must not have been a terribly uncommon sight, if we believe poem n. 369 of the *Ryōjin hishō* (Poems to Make the Dust Dance, ca. 1169):

Up-to-date fashion in the capital:
eyebrows penciled willow-thin,
all sorts of hairdos, hairpieces,
shioyuki, Ōmi women, women dressed like men;
not a nun without a halberd, none!¹³.

Women carrying or practicing *naginata* are also seen in the iconography of the Tokugawa period, centuries after the *Heike*. However, full-fledged women warriors must have been very rare. Even in literature they are not easy to find. In the numerous versions of the *Heike monogatari* we meet only three of them: Tomoe, Yamabuki, and Aoi, all of whom are affiliated with Yoshinaka.

Warriors' wives and daughters

Although some spend more time at court than in warrior households, the wives and daughters of Taira clansmen do not reflect the image we might have of relatively passive Heian-era court women. There is a cluster of "strong wives" in the *Heike monogatari*. Some are veritable family heads, who, once their husbands are gone, manage the household and guard the safety of their remaining members, especially the children. Their responsibility for the children and their readiness to take complete charge stands out. In these stories it becomes clear that, with several exceptions, the wives are the ones to whom the memory of events is entrusted, the ones left to perform memorial services, to pray for the dead in subsequent years, and to remember and tell the world about what happened to their husbands and families.

¹² Translation of the noh *Tomoe* in Tyler (1991).

¹³ Kono goro miyako ni hayaru mono / ryūtai kamigami esekazura / shioyuki ōmime onnakaza / naginata motanu ama zo naki. Usuda and Shinma (1976, p. 296). English translation in Kim (1994, p. 148-149). According to Kim, the meaning of *shioyuki* is unclear but might have referred to courtesans.

Dainagon no Suke

Lady Dainagon no Suke is the principal consort of Taira no Shigehira, the son of Kiyomori and the person held responsible for the fire that destroyed important temples in Nara in 1180. She is also the wet nurse of the emperor Antoku. Shigehira, now in enemy hands, is allowed to visit her on his way to Nara, where he is scheduled to be executed.

Their encounter is very emotional, with much weeping on both sides. The couple exchange poems, promising to meet again in the next life. Shigehira cuts off a lock of his hair and gives it to Dainagon as a keepsake. Having noticed that he is wearing shabby clothes, she provides her husband with an elegant new outfit.

After Shigehira's execution, Dainagon no Suke does not immediately become a nun. Before taking Buddhist vows she makes sure that her husband's memorial service is properly taken care of. She sends a palanquin to fetch his body, which has been cast away and is already rotting; forcefully reclaims the head from the Nara monks; and cremates the reassembled corpse. A funeral is held and a grave built, while the bones are sent to Mount Kōya. We see Dainagon no Suke again in the "Initiate's Chapter," where she is a nun serving Kenreimon'in. In the end, she attains salvation.

The Wife of Taira no Koremori

In the *Heike monogatari*, warriors' wives feature in several touching episodes. One is Koremori's wife, one of the few female protagonists of the *Heike monogatari* whose name has not survived. Koremori's wife is a woman known for her exceptional beauty. She is the mother of two small children, a boy and a girl. The boy, Rokudai, is a potential heir to the headship of the Taira clan. When her husband, who is Kiyomori's grandson, is forced to flee to the West, he tells her that if he dies, she should not become a nun, but should take care of their children and find a new partner. Koremori's wife, who has been with him since they both were adolescents, does not want to accept this destiny and begs him to take her; she lets him go only when he promises that he will send for her after finding a safe place for the whole family. His children hold on to his sleeves crying. When he finally takes his leave, his wife, children, and ladies-in-waiting throw themselves to the floor in distress in what may be the most dramatic scene of group grieving in the whole tale.¹⁴

We meet Koremori's wife again in the tenth scroll, when she sends attendants in disguise to make sure her husband is not among a number of slain Taira warriors whose severed heads are paraded through the capital. Koremori is actually at Yashima, the Taira stronghold on the island of Shikoku, trying to work out how to sneak back to the capital and see his family. He eventually gives up hope and resolves to go to Mount Kōya where, though still feeling

¹⁴ *Fushimarobi* "throwing oneself to the floor" should be interpreted both literally and figuratively. This gesture of grief, together with weeping, is very common among men and women in warrior tales. Another common act of desperation (performed by women) is *hikikazuki*, to pull one's outermost robe over one's head.

attachment to his wife and children, he becomes a Buddhist monk. Later he drowns himself as another novice recites scriptures for his salvation. Though it is a major offense for a monk to commit suicide, a peaceful, self-induced death is preferable to the violent end he is likely to meet at the hands of the Minamoto.

When Koremori's wife is informed of her husband's death, she is so stricken by the loss of her companion that she abandons lay life and takes vows on the spot, contravening her husband's orders to take care of their children. Yet by becoming a nun she will be able to more effectively pray for his salvation.

Kozaishō (d. 1184?)

For some wives, the pain of separation from their loved ones is such that they see no other recourse than suicide. Kozaishō, Third Rank Lady of Echizen and the wife of Taira no Michimori, is one of them. She is informed of Michimori's death by his closest retainer, who has reluctantly renounced an honorable death at the side of his master so that he may return to her to recount his lord's end. Kozaishō, pregnant with his child, hears of his death as she is sailing to Yashima to escape the Minamoto forces. After letting a few days pass, as if to make sure that her husband is really dead, she resolves to drown herself. Her nurse begs her to desist, or at least to let her to commit suicide together with her, but Kozaishō does not listen. She sneaks out at night and jumps overboard. Kozaishō decides to die rather than live and give birth to Michimori's heir because rather than a consolation, the child would be a painful reminder of its father. After she has drowned, the narrative explains in a flashback how she met and fell in love with Michimori. She was a lady-in-waiting for empress Jōsaimon'in and the greatest beauty in the palace. Michimori caught a glimpse of her during an outing to see cherry blossoms and started inundating her with letters and poems. Kozaishō, clearly a stubborn character, had been determined not to respond, but eventually capitulated when one of the letters accidentally fell into the hands of the empress, who in order to facilitate the relationship wrote an answer to Michimori in her own hand.

Niidono (1126-1185)

The most famous suicide by drowning in the *Heike monogatari* is that of Tokiko, better known as Niidono (Lady of the Second Rank) or Nii no ama (Nun of the Second Rank), the principal wife of Taira no Kiyomori, mother of Kenreimon'in, and grandmother of the child emperor Antoku. She is one of the most remarkable characters in the entire *Heike monogatari*, and the protagonist of what is possibly its most famous scene: the drowning of the child emperor during the Dan-no-ura battle.

In the sixth scroll, Niidono assists Kiyomori in the final stage of his illness. Kiyomori's fever is so high that the water used to cool him off immediately turns to steam. The heat coming from his body keeps everybody away; she is the only one brave enough to approach him. Niidono has an ominous dream in which a flaming carriage sent by the hell's tribunal and driven by ox-faced and horse-faced creatures comes to fetch Kiyomori and bring

him to Mugen Jigoku (the “hell of uninterrupted suffering”). The dream confirms that Kiyomori is doomed, and, in fact, he passes away in unbearable pain a few days later. In the tenth scroll, Niidono deals with another tragic circumstance: her son Shigehira (the one found responsible for the Nara fire) has been captured by the Minamoto. Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa issues an edict offering to pardon him in exchange for the return of the three sacred imperial treasures which are in the hands of the Taira clan. The edict is actually a ransom request, and it is evident that Shigehira will be executed even if the Taira give up the treasures. Yet Niidono is so touched by a letter she received from Shigehira that she begs the Taira council to relinquish the treasures immediately in the desperate hope that the Minamoto will actually return her son. Obviously the treasures, the possession of which legitimizes the Emperor’s position, cannot be easily yielded. The old woman cries out to express her pain over all the personal blows she has suffered and the decline of the Taira. She asks to be killed then and there. Everyone in the room is overcome with tears.

During the battle of Dan-no-ura, Niidono realizes that all is lost. Horrified by the thought of capture, she resolves to drown herself and her grandson, the eight-year-old emperor Antoku.

Although I am only a woman, I will not fall into enemy hands. I will go where His Majesty goes. Follow swiftly, you whose hearts are loyal to him (TOMIKURA, 1966-1968. v. 3, p. 512. English translation by MCCULLOUGH, 1988, p. 378).

Niidono occupies such a position of power in the Taira clan that she cannot simply move to a hermitage in the Kyoto mountains and pray for salvation. Becoming a nun is not enough; in fact, she already is a nun. She must follow her husband Kiyomori in death, and must take Antoku with her. Her drowning and the drowning of the child emperor symbolizes the complete, irreversible defeat of the Taira family.

While Niidono shares some traits with Kiyomori – she is emotional, energetic and ready to make decisions, no matter how rash they might be – she is, in contrast to her husband, compassionate. Her final thoughts are for the salvation of others. As later recounted by her daughter, the imperial consort Kenreimon’in, her parting words are:

There is no chance in a thousand myriads that any male member of our house will survive. Even if some distant relative were to be left, we could not expect him to perform memorial services for us. Since it has always been the custom to spare women, you must do your best to come safely through the battle so that you may pray for His Majesty’s salvation. I hope you will also say a prayer for the rest of us (TOMIKURA, 1966-1968. v. 4, p. 209. English translation in MCCULLOUGH, 1998, p. 435).

After Dan-no-ura and the execution of the remaining male Taira members, including Shigemori and Rokudai (Koremori’s son), it is Kenreimon’in, the only surviving Taira in the capital, who bears the honor and the responsibility of preserving the memory of the past by praying for the souls of the departed.

Kenreimon'in (1155-1213)

Known as Tokuko before taking Buddhist vows, the daughter of Kiyomori and Tokiko/Niidono, the imperial consort and mother of an emperor, Kenreimon'in belongs to the court as much as to the warrior world.

At Dan-no-ura on that fateful day, she and her mother are aboard the same boat. After witnessing the drowning of her child, she jumps into the water to drown herself, but she is rescued by Minamoto warriors and brought back to the capital. Some time after becoming a nun she moves to the Jakkōin temple in Ōhara, an area deep in the mountains about ten miles northeast of Kyoto.

Kenreimon'in is the protagonist of *Kanjō no maki*, "The Initiate's Chapter," an epilogue to the *Tale of the Heike*, the final scroll of the texts belonging to the Ichikata-ryū, one of the *Heike* performers' lineages. In this chapter, Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192), a key actor in the Genpei War, ventures to Ōhara to pay a visit to Kenreimon'in. Through Go-Shirakawa's sharp eyes we realize that things have changed greatly from the days when the former imperial consort lived in the palace, wore elegant brocade, and was revered by the court. In the more recent past, dreadful things have happened; thousands of people have disappeared, and the nun Kenreimon'in now spends her days in a humble hermitage, praying and doing physical work such as looking for flowers to offer the buddhas. The sight of her coming down a mountain path, completely unrecognizable in her patched robes, deeply moves Go-Shirakawa, and the Heike audience as well.

After a moment of hesitation, Kenreimon'in reassures the retired emperor about her condition:

Of course, this present state causes me temporary distress, but I look on it as a blessing when I think about my future enlightenment. I have hastened to become Śākyamuni's disciple and have reverently placed my faith in Amida's vow (TOMIKURA, 1966-1968. v. 4, p. 209. English translation in MCCULLOUGH, 1998, p. 434).

She continues by saying that while there is no day on which she does not await salvation, her son Antoku is constantly on her mind, and she will carry his image even in her future lives. Kenreimon'in is a nun bound for rebirth in Amida's paradise, but also a mother unable to forget her son.

Shortly afterward, she delivers a long monologue in which she summarizes her life from the happy days of Kiyomori's flowering fortunes to the final stages of the battle of Dan-no-ura and the defeat of the Taira.

The experiences in Kenreimon'in's life, she says, are such that she can claim to have witnessed the *rokudō*, the Six States of Existence, the cycle of death and rebirth one must break free of in order to achieve enlightenment.¹⁵

¹⁵ The States of Existence, or Six Paths, are: Beings in Hell (*jigokudō*) the lowest and worst realm, where torture and aggression reign; Hungry Ghosts (*gaki-dō*), the realm of hungry spirits, who constantly crave; Animals (*chikushō-dō*) who are characterized by stupidity and servitude; Asura (*ashura-dō*), demigods who are powerful, fierce and constantly making war; Humans (*jindō*) for whom enlightenment is possible, although most are blinded and consumed by desire;

She likens the long days spent on boats to the tortures of the Hell of Hungry Spirits, and the continuous sound of fighting to the battles between unsaved warrior souls. She recounts a dream she had after being captured in which she saw an array of dead Taira in formal outfits standing in a place grander than the imperial palace itself. They tell her they are in urgent need of salvation and ask for her prayers. This dream, in addition to Niidono's wish that Kenreimon'in survive to be able to pray, makes her the ultimate pacifier of the souls of the Taira.

After her chanting voice had gradually weakened, a purple cloud trailed in the west, a marvelous fragrance permeated the chamber, and the sound of music was heard in the heavens (TOMIKURA, 1966-1968. v. 4, p. 209. English translation in MCCULLOUGH, 1998, p. 438).

Purple clouds, perfume, and music are clear signs of rebirth in the western paradise of Amida Buddha, to whom the imperial lady had been chanting until the end. The text explains that the two women who assisted her, Dainagon no Suke and Awa no Naishi, are also saved.

The testimony of Kenreimon'in in the "Initiates' Chapter" and its strong Buddhist overtones frame the whole *Tale of the Heike* as a story about the impermanence of things and the emptiness of human desires.

Conclusion

A complete survey of the female characters of the *Heike monogatari* – only some of whom are examined in this essay – reveals that with only two or three exceptions they all become nuns and are eventually reborn in paradise.

In the *Heike monogatari*, and in the Genpei era generally, entering religious orders is not exclusively a woman's prerogative. The men who survive the war become monks as well. It is true that some of them take their vocation seriously, but we also see others who do not show any genuine interest in salvation. The most extreme case is that of Kiyomori, in theory a Buddhist novice, who in the last moments of his life asks for his enemy's head instead of hoping for a good rebirth.

Most of the Heike women take vows after the death of a close male relative – usually a father, husband, or son. Why do they do this? As scholars have suggested, for a medieval audience it would be clear that women become nuns in order to be in a better position to placate the spirits of their dead.¹⁶ It is also possible that the *Heike* narrators insist on representing women taking vows in order to reinforce the story's Buddhist message. These women become nuns because the loss of their loved ones makes them understand the meaning of impermanence. That prestige and status are short-lived and that humans should

Deva (*tendō*), who are divine spirits and live in splendor, but are still part of the world of suffering.

¹⁶ On the placatory function of angry spirits (*onryō*) carried out by *Heike* and *noh*, see Plutschow (1990).

think instead about their future rebirth is the most important message the authors of the *Heike* seek to convey.

What is most interesting to note is the way that women – who in Buddhist scriptures are often held to be defiled beings subject to a number of material and spiritual restrictions – are represented in works of literature such as the *Heike* as the characters who best understand impermanence and who are actually able to achieve salvation.

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Recebido em 30 de agosto de 2017
Aprovado em 01 de novembro de 2017