

IAN HIDEO LEVY

Hitomaro and the Birth of Japanese Lyricism



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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS



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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Guildford, Surrey

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data will be found on the last printed page of this book

ISBN 0-691-06581-0

Publication of this book has been aided by the Whitney Darrow Publication Reserve Fund of Princeton University Press

This book has been composed in Monophoto Bembo
by Asco Trade Typesetting Ltd., Hong Kong

Clothbound editions of Princeton University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
and binding materials are chosen for strength and durability

Printed in the United States of America by Princeton University Press,
Princeton, New Jersey

For Nakanishi Susumu

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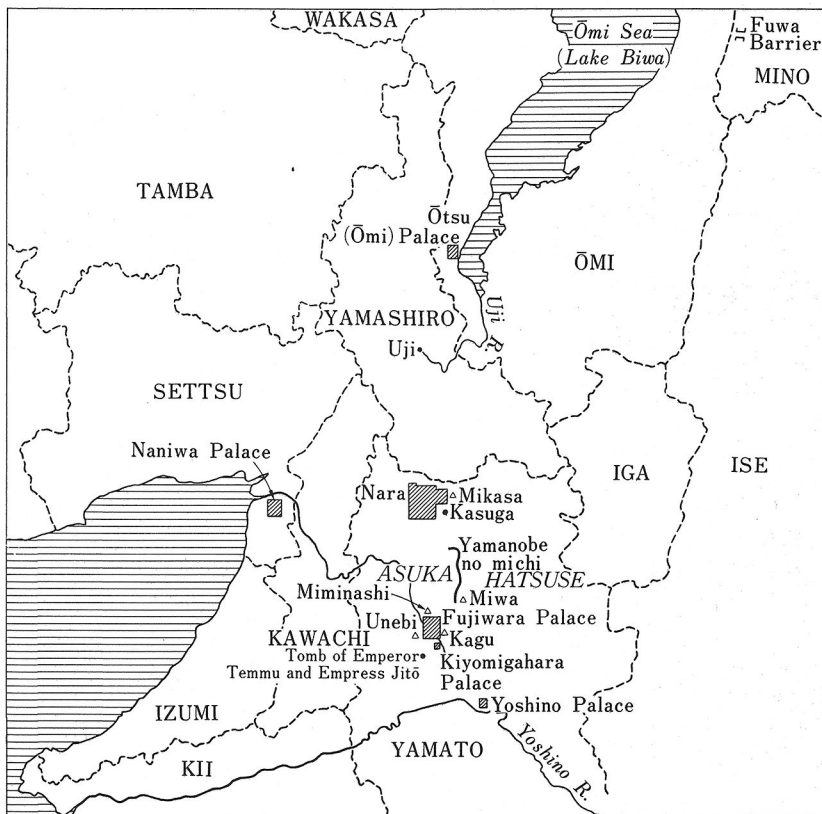
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEN ORIGINALLY SUBMITTED as a dissertation at Princeton University, this manuscript was read by Professor Earl Miner, Professor Marius Jansen, and Professor Andrew Plaks. I would like to thank all three for their comments and suggestions. I am especially grateful to Professor Miner for his detailed comments and advice, and for the inspiration of his own career. Above all, *Japanese Court Poetry*, by Professor Miner and Professor Robert H. Brower of the University of Michigan, has been a major inspiration of this book, as indeed it has for all Western critical studies of *waka* in our time. I also wish to thank R. Miriam Brokaw, Editor and Associate Director of Princeton University Press, for her interest and encouragement. Research for this book was made possible by a grant from the Japan Foundation. I would like to thank the Foundation for its support.

My greatest debt is to Professor Nakanishi Susumu of Seijō University, for the magnificence of his teaching, for many specific points of advice, and for his encouragement of my *Man'yō* studies over the years. This book is dedicated to Professor Nakanishi with respect and gratitude.

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Map of Yamato and environs in the age of Hitomaro.

INTRODUCTION

KAKINOMOTO NO HITOMARO is the name by which we know the most important poet of early Japan, the author of the most celebrated poems in the *Man'yōshū* anthology. Hitomaro's work, composed mostly in the last decade of the seventh century, has had a lasting—some would say supreme—place in the canon of classical verse. A thousand years have ratified Ki no Tsurayuki's epithet of 905 declaring Hitomaro “the saint of Japanese poetry” (“uta no hijiri”).

The poems of Hitomaro present us with the enigma of a mature opus coming at the beginning of literary history, of a powerful lyrical voice springing, with an unprecedented rhetorical complexity, from an archaic tradition. As Japan's first major poet Hitomaro created and has come to epitomize many of the particular qualities associated with the *Man'yōshū* itself: an unsurpassed descriptive grandeur and large-scale structural elegance, a direct and passionate lyrical voice that seems to be informed by an earlier sense of the enspirited vitality of nature, a “classical” harmony between the expressive sensibility and the landscape from which it harvests its metaphors. The *Man'yōshū* is a profoundly representative anthology. It includes the works of hundreds of poets. But its position as the premier collection of classical verse, and its special place in Japanese literary aesthetics, would be unimaginable without the poetry of Hitomaro.

The Ten Thousand Leaves

The *Man'yōshū* is an anthology of some 4,516 poems from the Asuka and Nara Periods, seventh- and eighth-century Japan. *Man'yōshū* means “The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves.” The title seems to signify that this is the “anthology of all anthologies.” The original footnotes in the *Man'yōshū* often mention earlier collections such as the *Ruiju Karin* (*The Forest of Classified Verse*) and the *Kokashū* (*An Anthology of Ancient Poems*), none of

which are extant. These are thought to be among the sources from which the *Man'yōshū* was compiled. The *Man'yōshū* includes the work of some four hundred named poets, ranging from emperors to beggars, from Nara aristocrats who had studied in T'ang China to frontier guardsmen recruited from provincial villages. The *Man'yōshū* is thus a representative culling of what was considered the best in *waka*, native verse, during the first great flowering of Japanese culture.

Although a few of the poems in the *Man'yōshū* may date back to the sixth century or earlier and some others may have been added as late as the ninth century, the vast majority of poems in the anthology date from the second quarter of the seventh century to the middle of the eighth. The last specifically dated poem was composed in 759. The present study is especially concerned with the poems composed in the last half of the seventh century, culminating in the work of Hitomaro.

The *Man'yōshū* consists of twenty "books" (*maki*, or "scrolls"). The first three books form the classical core of the anthology. Here we find the three thematic categories into which Japanese poetry was first divided. These are "poems on various themes" (*zōka*), "personal exchanges" (*sōmon*), and "laments" (*banka*, literally "coffin-pulling poems"). For the most part these categories consist, respectively, of the poetry of celebration, longing, and bereavement. Book One is a collection of "poems on various themes" arranged chronologically by imperial reigns. Book Two, also compiled chronologically, consists of personal exchanges and laments. Book Three is a collection of poems in all three categories (with the personal exchanges under the heading "metaphorical poems," *hiyuka*).

In these first three books of the *Man'yōshū* we find the bulk of poems carrying in their titles the words "written by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro." Hitomaro composed in all three categories, and his most sophisticated work is marked by a high degree of interchange between them. We shall find, for example, in Hitomaro's lament for Princess Asuka (II.196, discussed on pp. 148–153) celebratory phrases and amatory formulae woven into a grand tapestry of bereavement. Hitomaro's opus often presents us with an intricate synthesis of the formal and thematic categories within whose confines lesser poets excelled.

The Forms of the *Man'yōshū*

Japanese poetry has neither meter nor rhyme. It is formally constituted by a rhythm of phrases (*ku*) with alternating numbers of syllables. In the earliest

poetry we can discern various patterns of long/short alternation: three syllables/five syllables, four syllables/six syllables, and so forth. By the middle of the seventh century, this has, to a large degree, settled into the pattern of five syllable/seven syllable alternation that would rule Japanese verse until the Meiji Period.

The two major forms of Man'yō verse are the *chōka* ("long poem") and the *tanka* ("short poem"). The *chōka* consists of a number of alternating five/seven phrases followed by two final seven-syllable phrases: 5/7/5/7/5 . . . 7/7. A *chōka* may range from a few phrases to over a hundred. The longest *chōka* in the *Man'yōshū* is Hitomaro's lament for Prince Takechi (II.199, discussed on pp. 137–146).

The *tanka* consists of five phrases, for a total of thirty-one syllables: 5/7/5/7/7.

After the waning of the *chōka* in the late Nara period, the *tanka* would be the major form of Japanese verse for a thousand years. The *chōka*, which reached its finest use in the hands of Hitomaro, is strictly a Man'yō form.

Some 260 of the poems in the *Man'yōshū* are *chōka*, and approximately 4,200 are *tanka*. The anthology also includes sixty examples of an early form of verse called the *sedōka* (5/7/7/5/7/7), and a single example of a minor variant form, the *bussokusekika* (5/7/5/7/7/7). Neither of these is relevant to the present work.

Attached to most of the *chōka* in the *Man'yōshū* are *tanka* operating as satellite verses. These are called "envoys" (*hanka*, literally "repeating poems"). The envoy is important in early Man'yō poetry for its presentation of a lyrical perspective that acts as a counterpoint to the ritual language in the *chōka*. As the *chōka* itself developed, the envoy would often take the final lyrical theme that climaxes the longer poem and bring it to a new expressive realization, at times a fuller one than that within the *chōka* itself. In this sense, the envoy would be an important device for Hitomaro; some of his best envoys would be recorded as "*tanka*" rather than "*hanka*," as if to signify their autonomous lyrical weight.

The poems bearing in their titles the words "written by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro" include sixteen *chōka* and sixty-three *tanka*, plus their variants. The sixty-three shorter verses include both poems composed as independent *tanka* and envoys in *tanka* form. This is the body of work specifically recorded as being authored by Hitomaro and known in Japanese scholarship as the *Hitomaro sakka*. Apart from it, there are a large number of poems in what is known as the "Hitomaro Collection" (*Hitomaro kashū*). These include 330 *tanka*, thirty-five *sedōka*, and two *chōka*. But the authorship of

the Hitomaro Collection is extremely controversial. Some of the poems are obviously anachronistic. It is all but impossible to say which of the many varied works in the collection might actually have been written by Hitomaro and which were included in it either because of a perceived resemblance to his known work, or by the desire to associate a later work with Hitomaro's glory by attribution. These questions lie outside the scope of the present study, which is concerned with the poems specifically recorded as having been "written by" Hitomaro. These form the most important group of poems in the *Man'yōshū*—the *chōka* and envoys that are the acknowledged masterpieces of the collection and in which a full and complex lyrical voice was first achieved in Japanese literature.

Kakinomoto no Hitomaro

Hitomaro is a poet without a biography. To ask "Who was Hitomaro?" is something like asking "Who was Homer?" We know absolutely nothing of his personal life. There are no "sources" apart from his actual works in the *Man'yōshū*, and their titles and footnotes. The only statements we can make about Hitomaro the man are obvious from his poetic practice itself: that he served the imperial family as a court poet from 689 onward, composing odes for imperial excursions and elegies for imperial deaths; that most of his poems were written in the 690s, during the reign of Empress Jitō; that some of his work may possibly date from the first decade of the eighth century; and that he had already achieved a legendary status by the Nara period.

The most important speculations in Japanese scholarship concerning Hitomaro's life are not "biographical" but rather "genealogical." We do know that the Kakinomoto clan was an old family established in Yamato, the plain in western Japan where the Asuka and Nara capitals were located. One group of Japanese scholars, commencing with the late Orikuchi Shinobu and more recently represented by Yamamoto Kenkichi,¹ has speculated that the clan into which Hitomaro was born served as ceremonial reciters at Court. This genealogical background may account for Hitomaro's service at Court as a provider of public poems of praise and lament for the imperial family. But genealogical background cannot explain the

¹ For the fullest exposition, see Yamamoto Kenkichi, *Kakinomoto no Hitomaro* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1962).

unprecedented scale and power of Hitomaro's *chōka*. Nor can any extrinsic speculation account for the original vision that Hitomaro brought to an archaic ritual form. Hitomaro's achievements demand an intrinsic analysis set in the context of the history of poetry in Japan.

The Birth of Lyricism

The history of Japanese poetry offers us an opportunity, unusual in world literature, to discern, from extant texts, the process by which a lyric voice is born from an archaic ritual verbal art.

This unusual opportunity arises for two reasons. The first is that this shift occurred in a dramatically short period in Japan. Japanese culture had been developing under the stimulus of Chinese and Korean influence for some time prior to the seventh century. But it was only toward the middle of that century that the content of this influence came to include poetry, yielding a new consciousness of verbal expression as a specifically aesthetic, rather than magical and ceremonial, medium. As a result, the process of change can be traced in the texts of the half-century from the 640s, when the composition of Japanese poetry was still largely determined by a collective, ritual necessity, to the 690s, the decade of Hitomaro. The essential process can be discerned within the *Man'yōshū* anthology.

The second reason has to do with the peculiar nature of this shift itself as it occurred in Japan. The animistic view of nature was never replaced by the sort of sharply dualistic vision setting man and nature at opposite poles of reality that developed in the West. Instead, an archaic sense of the landscape retained its vitality even as Japanese poetry acquired a sophisticated rhetoric. The shift to lyricism in Japan is not a matter of discarding archaic belief as in the West, where the animistic world exists for literature only as a nostalgic Romantic fantasy. Rather, in Japan it involves the birth of an intervening aesthetic consciousness, which reshapes the animistic landscape according to a creative intent that does not challenge its fundamental vitality. Far from being discarded, the primitive sense of nature as an enspirited thing is exploited by the new consciousness for lyrical purposes far beyond the austere bounds of ritual itself. Thus some of Hitomaro's most famous *chōka* are noted for their panoramic evocations of the Japanese myths, such that Hitomaro has been considered a quintessentially Shinto poet. Yet a close reading of even his most "mythic" poetry reveals a rhetorical consciousness

and a suppleness of language that is lacking in myth itself. Archaic belief is still alive at the end of the seventh century in Japan, alive enough for Hitomaro to infuse its vitality into a structure of expression that is anything but archaic.

The Asuka and Nara periods were characterized by an enthusiastic acquisition of foreign culture rivaled perhaps only by the last hundred years in Japan. When one considers that this was also the epoch of the *Man'yōshū*, it seems quite remarkable that the anthology stands apart from much of that influence. *Waka* was an independent stream, seemingly isolated from the powerful currents of religion, philosophy, and art from China and Korea that were transforming Japanese culture. It was the first golden age of Buddhist art, a time when the nation's entire resources were spent on the construction of the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji in Nara. But there are almost no liturgical "Buddhist poems" in the *Man'yōshū*. Indeed, the contrast with the "Prayer for Rebirth" and the "Hymn to the Thousand-Handed Goddess of Mercy" found in Korean *hyangga* poetry at this time is quite striking, especially when we consider that the *Man'yō* script itself is very likely derived from the method of orthography used in Silla verse.²

External influence on the *Man'yōshū* is more tenuous and indirect. There are two major examples of such influence explored in the present study. The first concerns the Japanese acquisition of a continental literary culture in the mid-seventh century through Chinese and Korean teachers at Court. The stimulation of this contact—which included both reading and composition of Chinese verse by the Japanese—seems to have given rise to a contiguous perception of the secular potential of native verse. This development led, in the 660s, to the conscious aesthetic experiments of Princess Nukada, Hitomaro's most important predecessor.

The second major influence is more extrinsic and involves a change in the status of the emperor in poetry. The emperor, who in archaic verse had spoken and acted as chief ritualist of the Yamato clan, becomes the object of rhetorical deification. This seems to reflect both a large historical shift away from the magical conception of imperial power toward a Chinese model of the state and, more immediately, a need to justify the rule of Emperor Temmu following his victory in the Jinshin War of succession in 673. Political necessity is surely the most tenuous of all possible extrinsic de-

²For selected English translations of *hyangga*, see Peter H. Lee, ed., *Anthology of Korean Literature* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1981), pp. 17–21.