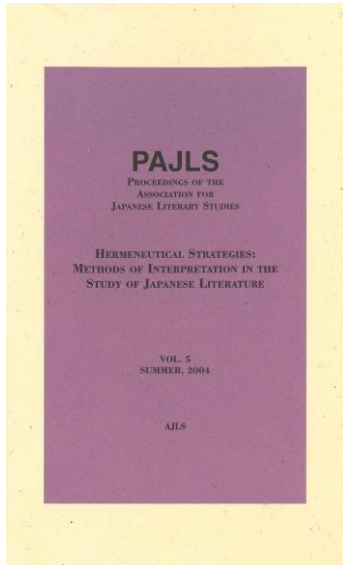


“*Little Atsumori* and *The Tale of the Heike*: Fiction as Commentary, and the Significance of a Name”

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**LITTLE ATSUMORI AND THE TALE OF THE HEIKE:
FICTION AS COMMENTARY,
AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A NAME**

R. Keller Kimbrough

As a hermeneutical approach to the study of canonical literary texts, the analysis of spin-off works of medieval fiction and drama is a potentially fruitful one, offering in some cases fresh interpretations of the classics. One such derivative work is the otogizōshi *Ko-Atsumori* ("Little Atsumori"), dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth century and apparently rooted in the medieval proselytizing traditions of the Kōya *hijiri* and a variety of Tendai and Pure Land preacher-entertainers.¹ Based upon the Atsumori episode in *The Tale of the Heike* and surviving in numerous manuscripts in at least two main textual lines,² *Ko-Atsumori* tells the tale of Taira no Atsumori's death at the hand of Kumagae no Jirō Naozane at the Battle of Ichinotani in the second month of 1184, the resulting plight of Atsumori's pregnant wife, and the youthful tribulations of their unfortunate and—at the time of Atsumori's death—as-yet unborn son, "Little Atsumori," from whom the work takes its name. As a Muromachi-period sequel to the Atsumori episode in *The Tale of the Heike*, *Ko-Atsumori* interprets the Atsumori episode as it recreates and develops it, and thus, although a didactic fictional narrative rather than an overtly exegetical text, it can be read as a kind of inadvertent commentary and mined for insights into its antecedent account.

¹ On the complex and contentious issue of *Ko-Atsumori*'s roots in medieval preaching, see Muroki 1970, pp. 347-54; Minobe 1988, pp. 105-128; Saya 1993, pp. 42-51; and Saya 2002, pp. 79-96.

² Matsumoto Ryūshin has classified surviving *Ko-Atsumori* manuscripts into two broad textual lines: (1) the "old picture scroll" line, represented by several illustrated *Ko-Atsumori* scrolls dating from the late Muromachi period (sixteenth century), and (2) the Shibukawa (or *Otogi bunko* / *Otogizōshi*) line, represented by a number of shorter Edo-period manuscripts, the best known of which was published by Shibukawa Seiemon ca. 1716-1729 in a box-set anthology of short medieval fiction titled *Otogi bunko*. See Matsumoto 1989, pp. 86-111. In addition, Tokuda Kazuo has argued that the newly discovered Kōshōji *Ko-Atsumori* manuscript, dating from the late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century, represents a third textual line somewhere between the old picture scroll and Shibukawa lines. See Tokuda 2002(a), pp. 35-41.

READING ATSUMORI IN *THE TALE OF THE HEIKE*

What can *Ko-Atsumori* tell us about the Atsumori episode in *The Tale of the Heike*? First, let us consider some of the ways in which the *Heike* account has been previously understood. According to one prominent interpretation, the story of Atsumori's battlefield demise ("Atsumori *saigō*," or "The Death of Atsumori" in Helen McCullough's 1988 translation of the fourteenth-century *Kakuichi-bon* text) is not about Atsumori at all; rather, it is the tale of how Kumagae came to renounce the world and take monastic vows. Saya Makito is one recent proponent of this view. Following Mizuhara Hajime, Saya argues that in *The Tale of the Heike*, Atsumori serves as no more than a generic young Taira whose sole purpose is to be killed so that Kumagae may awaken to the nature of Buddhist Truth. Saya explains that the seemingly accidental substitution of Taira no Narimori for Atsumori in the corresponding section of *Genpei tōjōroku*—an alternate and incomplete text of the *Heike*—indicates Atsumori's utter unimportance (other than as a stock Taira figure) to the episode that now bears his name.³

A second notable interpretation concerns the role of music in the tale. *Heike monogatari* manuscripts in the *katari-bon*, or "recited," textual line (including the *Kakuichi-bon*, best known among contemporary Japanese and English-reading audiences) tend to emphasize the importance of Atsumori's flute to the episode as a whole. The flute, we are told, is a symbol of the refinement and gentility of the Taira nobles. It is Kumagae's discovery of the instrument, variously named "Saeda," "Koeda," and "Aoba,"⁴ that contributes to his decision to become a monk. As the *Kakuichi-bon* narrator explains in an apparent defense of music, "it is deeply moving that [Atsumori's flute], though [an instrument of] 'wild words and fancy phrases' (*kyōgen kigo*), should have led [a warrior] to the religious life."⁵ Both the Muromachi-period *kōwakamai* libretto "Atsumori" and the noh play "Atsumori" (composed by Zeami prior to 1423) follow the *katari-bon* line of *Heike* texts in declaring the importance of Atsumori's flute. Zeami's "Atsumori" moreover identifies Suma as the place of Atsumori's death,⁶ suggesting a connection between the

³ Saya 2002, pp. 8-13. Also see Mizuhara 1979, and the *Genpei tōjōroku* passage in Yamashita 1963, pp. 203-205. Saya maintains that the Atsumori episode in the *Shibu kassenjō-bon* text of *Heike monogatari* is an exception: because it intimates the sadness of Atsumori's young lover, the *Shibu kassenjō-bon* fleshes out Atsumori's character, lending him a depth of his own. Saya 2002, pp. 16-18.

⁴ On the naming of the flute, see Saya 2002, pp. 26-35.

⁵ Kajihara and Yamashita 1993, p. 177; translation modified from McCullough 1988, p. 317.

⁶ Yokomichi and Omote 1960, pp. 233-40; Tyler 1992, pp. 37-48.

composition of the play and the fifteenth-century proselytizing and storytelling traditions of Suma Temple, a Shingon institution renowned in the medieval period for its reliquary enshrinement of Atsumori's flute.⁷

Unlike *Heike monogatari* manuscripts in the *katari-bon* textual line, works in the *yomi-hon*, or "written," line of *Heike* texts tend to downplay the significance of Atsumori's flute (or, in *Genpei tōjōroku* and the *Enkyō-bon* and *Nagato-bon* texts, his *hichiriki*, a double-reed woodwind instrument employed in traditional court music). *Ko-Atsumori* was clearly written under the influence of one or more *Heike* manuscript in the *yomi-hon* textual line, and like the *noh* play "Ikuta Atsumori," composed by Konparu Zenpō in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, it identifies the site of Atsumori's death as Ikuta rather than Suma. It would thus appear that in its so-called "old picture scroll" textual line, *Ko-Atsumori* was composed free of the influence of either Zeami's "Atsumori" or the Suma Temple cult of Atsumori's flute.⁸ And while *Ko-Atsumori* does contain references to Atsumori's flute, it presents the instrument as an object of inheritance—a symbol of Taira patrimony—rather than one of music or the arts, indicating its unknown author's disregard for music as a significant thematic element within the parent *Heike* tale.

KO-ATSUMORI AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A NAME

The story of Little Atsumori (or "Atsumori, Jr.," one might say) dates to at least the fifteenth century. Its earliest known reference is contained in a *Shaken nichiroku* diary entry from the fourth day of the third month of 1485, in which the *Shaken nichiroku* author, a Zen priest by the name of Kikō Daishuku (1421-1487), records that the *Heike* reciter and storyteller Sōjū entertained him with a tale corresponding to what is now known as the *Ko-Atsumori* account.⁹ It may have been around this time, or perhaps somewhat later, that Konparu Zenpō (born in 1454) adopted the story of Atsumori's benighted son as the subject of his "Ikuta Atsumori."¹⁰ In the sixteenth century, the increasingly famous narrative came to be

⁷ According to the Suma Temple record *Tōzan rekidai*, Suma Temple was in the possession of Atsumori's flute from well before 1427. A Suma Temple *kanjin* (fund-raising) notice from 1498 advertises the presence of Atsumori's flute as well. See Saya 2002, pp. 39 and 48.

⁸ This is not necessarily the case with *Ko-Atsumori* manuscripts in the Shibukawa textual line, however, which Saya Makito argues is derived from the third part of the *sekkyō-jōruri* "Ko-Atsumori" (the first part of which is influenced by the *kōwakamai* "Atsumori"). See Saya 1993, pp. 48b-49b, and Saya 2002, pp. 90-92.

⁹ Minobe 1988, pp. 105-109.

¹⁰ In Yokomichi and Omote 1963, pp. 238-43.

reproduced in numerous lavishly illustrated *Ko-Atsumori* scrolls, which together constitute the otogizōshi's "old picture scroll" textual line.

In all of its surviving renditions, including the fifteenth-century "Ikuta Atsumori," the sixteenth-century otogizōshi *Ko-Atsumori*, and an early-seventeenth-century *sekkyō-jōruri* by the same name, the story of Little Atsumori's struggle with his past—his search for identity and his desperate attempt to connect with the father he never knew—is a story of the emotional and psychological havoc wrought by the twelfth-century Genpei War. The otogizōshi *Ko-Atsumori* in particular probes the effects of that war by describing the ways in which three characters—Kumagae, Atsumori's widow, and Little Atsumori—come to terms with the shared tragedies of their past. While the otogizōshi *Ko-Atsumori* is only superficially concerned with Kumagae's turn to Buddhism, and wholly unconcerned with the issue of music, it focuses upon the *Heike* account of Atsumori's revelation of his name to Kumagae in the moments before his death (in the *yomi-hon* textual line of *The Tale of the Heike*, that is¹¹) and the later consequences of that revelation. By choosing to explore this particular aspect of the classic *Heike* episode, the *Ko-Atsumori* author suggests the importance of this event to the account as a whole.

Like the Atsumori episode upon which it is based, *Ko-Atsumori* begins with Atsumori and Kumagae's fateful clash upon the beach. Prowling the coast in search of a high-ranking Taira opponent with whom he might engage, Kumagae happens upon the delicate young Atsumori, whom he spies urging his horse into the sea in a desperate attempt to retreat. Kumagae challenges him to return and fight. Atsumori does as he is told, and he is immediately overpowered. Pinning Atsumori to the ground and wresting off his helmet, Kumagae is surprised to find a young warrior, sixteen or seventeen years old. The narrator of the sixteenth-century Keiō University *Ko-Atsumori* manuscript explains:¹²

Kumagae hesitated before cutting off the boy's head.
 "Who are you?" he demanded. "Give me your name!"
 "You call yourself the fiercest warrior in Japan,"
 Atsumori replied, "but you make a foolish request! What kind

¹¹ Horitake Tadaaki ascribes Atsumori's refusal to divulge his name in *Heike monogatari* manuscripts in the *katari-bon* textual line to the desire of medieval *Heike* reciters to pique their audiences' interest by introducing an element of suspense. Horitake 1985, pp. 77-78.

¹² The Keiō University Library *Ko-Atsumori emaki* (in the old picture scroll textual line) is typeset and annotated in Matsumoto 1980, pp. 305-27, and translated (by me) in Shirane 2004. The illustrations are reproduced in color in Matsumoto 1979, pp. 6-14.

of man would give his name when he's held down by a foe? When a warrior gives his name, he gives a trophy to his enemy—a battlefield honor for him to pass on to his heirs. That's what it means to give your name! Now hurry up and take my head, and ask someone else whose it is."

Kumagae spoke: "What you say is true, but this morning, at the Ichinotani fortress gate, my son Kojirō Naoie died at the hand of the Noto Lord.¹³ You look to be about his age, and it makes me sorry. I'll pray for you when you're gone, so tell me your name."

"I'd rather not," Atsumori said. "But then, to think there's someone as feeling as you among the Eastern warriors... and what have I got to hide? I am Atsumori, sixteen years old, holder of fifth court rank with no official post. I am the third son of New Middle Counselor Tomomori. My father is the son of Master of the Office of Palace Repairs Tsunemori, who was himself a younger brother of Chancellor Kiyomori, an eighth generation descendent of Emperor Kanmu.¹⁴ This was my first battle. Please... if any of my family survive, give them this flute and *hitatare*."¹⁵ He took from his waist a flute in a rosewood case and handed it to Kumagae. "Now get it over with—hurry up and take my head!"

In declaring his name, Atsumori traces his patrilineal ancestry back to the eighth-century Emperor Kanmu, investing his disclosure with a ritual formality. It is a revelation fraught with significance for the larger *Ko-Atsumori* narrative (and thus, by implication, for the Atsumori episode in the *yomi-hon* textual line of *The Tale of the Heike*).

Herbert Plutschow has written at length about the significance of names in ancient Japanese literature. Plutschow maintains that names are sometimes revealed in *Kojiki*, *Man'yōshū*, and other works as "token[s] of surrender," because they are understood to manifest the essence of that to which they refer.¹⁶ Following Orikuchi Shinobu's early-twentieth-century

¹³ Taira no Noritsune (1160?-1185?) was known as the Noto Lord because he was appointed governor of Noto province when Kiyomori seized power in 1179.

¹⁴ Atsumori was actually the son of Tsunemori, not Tomomori (1152-1185). Also, Kiyomori was a twelfth generation descendent of Kanmu (737-806), not an eighth.

¹⁵ A *hitatare* (also *yoroi hitatare*) is a kind of matching shirt and pants worn under armor.

¹⁶ Plutschow 1995, p. 26. Also see Plutschow's discussion of the *Kakuichi-bon* Atsumori episode on pp. 30-31, in which Plutschow suggests (unconvincingly)

thought, Plutschow explains that in the ancient age, names were sometimes “linked ontically with their referents to the extent that, if a name were revealed, the life essence or *tama* of that name could be transferred to the interlocutor.”¹⁷ Although *Ko-Atsumori* dates from a later period, Plutschow’s (and Orikuchi’s) observations do much to shed light on the otogizōshi’s recreation of the *Heike* Atsumori episode. In *Ko-Atsumori*, Atsumori’s declaration of his name can be seen as an act of both surrender and appeal, for insofar as Atsumori entrusts Kumagae with his patriliney—a genealogical abstraction “ontically linked” to his essential self, to borrow Plutschow’s phrase¹⁸—he seemingly charges Kumagae with its conveyance, together with his flute and *hitatare*, to some member of Atsumori’s family who might survive.

As *Ko-Atsumori* continues, Kumagae finds himself overcome with emotion, powerless to strike. He decides to save Atsumori’s life, but his plan is foiled when he observes a group of thirty fellow riders approaching, and he cuts off Atsumori’s head. (In the *Enkyō-bon* and the *Nagato-bon* texts, Kumagae fears for his reputation if he is seen releasing an enemy warrior; in *Ko-Atsumori* and the *Kakuichi-bon*, he simply concludes that the boy will never escape.¹⁹) Disillusioned with the world, Kumagae ascends Mount Kōya, shaves his head in the manner of a priest, and later becomes a disciple of Hōnen, founder of the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist sect. Meanwhile, Atsumori’s widow bears a son—Atsumori’s heir—but fearing for her baby’s life if he should be found out for a Taira, she leaves him at a place called Shimomatsu near the Kamo Shrine. As karma would have it, Hōnen happens upon the infant, adopts him and raises him as his own. The years pass, and Kumagae, who has continued to live with Hōnen and his followers, is amazed and distressed at the child’s increasing resemblance to Atsumori.

that “Atsumori kept his name secret not because Kumagae was of inferior rank, but because Atsumori was convinced of and resigned to the outcome of the duel.”

¹⁷ Plutschow 1995, p. 30. Plutschow’s and Orikuchi’s conceptions of names are strikingly similar to those of Sigmund Freud, who writes in *Totem and Taboo* that “primitive races (as well as modern savages and even our own children) do not, like us, regard names as something indifferent and conventional, but as significant and essential. A man’s name is a principal component of his personality, perhaps even a portion of his soul” (Freud 1950, p. 112). Elsewhere, Freud maintains that “in the view of primitive man, one of the most important parts of a person is his name. So that if one knows the name of a man or of a spirit, one has obtained a certain amount of power over the owner of the name” (Freud 1950, p. 81).

¹⁸ Plutschow 1995, p. 25.

¹⁹ For the *Enkyō-bon* and *Nagato-bon* Atsumori episodes, see Kitahara and Ogawa 1990, vol. 2, pp. 264-70, and Asahara 1999, pp. 1248-55.

At the age of eight, Atsumori's son suffers a crisis of identity when in the course of an argument another child calls him a "motherless, fatherless orphan." Struck with an awareness of his parentless state—his lack of a lineage or a name—he falls into a deep malaise and refuses to eat or drink. The profundity of his dejection is such that Hōnen, fearing for the boy's life, gathers his disciples and asks them for any information that they might have about his parents. Kumagae responds that he has observed a young woman at several of the Master's lectures secretly doting on the boy and weeping. Hōnen therefore decides to hold a public sermon, at which time he pleads with his audience for help. Atsumori's widow steps forward, and placing the child upon her knee, she cries and explains her reason for leaving him as she did. Kumagae produces Atsumori's flute and *hitatare* and presents them to the widow and her son. When at first Atsumori refused to reveal his name to Kumagae, he did so because, as he explained, "when a warrior gives his name, he gives a trophy to his enemy—a battlefield honor for him to pass on to his heirs." Ironically, the heir to whom Atsumori's name is now passed—if only in a figurative transmission—is his own.

Having discovered his identity, Little Atsumori becomes consumed with a desire to meet his father. He settles into a seven-day prayer vigil at Kamo Shrine, pleading with the Kamo Deity to show him his father's ghost. On the final night of his supplication, the deity appears to him in a dream, and complimenting him on the strength of his filial devotion, he suggests that he visit Ikuta field on the Koyano Plain. Without a word to Hōnen, his mother or Kumagae, Little Atsumori sets out for Ikuta. After ten days of travel he arrives at Ichinotani, and wandering alone there in the night, he struggles through a raging storm. Komatsu Kazuhiko has observed that in medieval Japanese tales, demons and man-eating snakes typically appear amid onslaughts of wind and rain.²⁰ This would of course suggest the supernatural peril of Little Atsumori's solitary plight.

There are other ways to read the storm as well. Though writing within a different cultural context, the child psychologist-cum-literary critic Bruno Bettelheim has observed that European fairy tales tend to "describe inner states of the mind by means of images and actions."²¹ "In fairy tales," Bettelheim explains, "internal processes are translated into visual images. When the hero is confronted by difficult inner problems which seem to defy solution, his psychological state is not described; the fairy story shows him lost in a dense, impenetrable wood, not knowing

²⁰ Komatsu 1997, pp. 45-46.

²¹ Bettelheim 1976, p. 155.

which way to turn, despairing of finding a way out."²² The same is often true of otogizōshi. In the case of *Ko-Atsumori*, one might say that the tumultuous storm is an outward manifestation of Little Atsumori's inner, turbulent emotional state.

As Little Atsumori wanders forward, lost, he sees a light in the distance. Approaching it for a look, he finds a mysterious stranger pacing the veranda of a deserted temple hall:

"Excuse me," the boy called out.

"Who's there?" the man replied. "No one comes around here. Identify yourself!"

The boy wept and explained: "I am from the capital, and I'm searching for my father. I've been walking for the last ten days. But the rain is so heavy and the darkness so dark, I'm at my wits' end. Please give me lodging for the night."

"Who is your father?" the man asked.

The boy thought: "The Genji rule the land now, so what will happen if I give my name?... But I'll tell him anyway, and if I lose my life, it will have been for my father, which won't be so bad." He spoke: "My father was a Taira by the name of Atsumori, third son of the Master of Palace Repairs. He was cut down at the battle of Ichi-no-tani. I wanted to find his bones, so I prayed to the Kamo Deity. I had a dream-revelation, and I've come here to search at the Bay of Suma."

In a strange re-enactment of his converse with Kumagae, the ghost of Atsumori demands that Little Atsumori tell him his name. Like his father before him, the boy considers the possible consequences of his decision before making his reply. Then, by acknowledging his patriliney at the risk of his life—a most filial act—he and his father are united. Atsumori invites him inside, pillows his son's head upon his knee, and tells him of his death at Ichinotani and his wish that Little Atsumori should become a wise and learned priest.²³

The boy falls into a deep sleep, and when he awakes, both his father and the temple are gone. All that remains where he had rested his head is a mossy old thigh bone in a clump of grass. Bettelheim writes that "many fairy tale heroes, at a crucial point in their development, fall into a deep

²² Ibid., p. 155.

²³ In the Shibukawa text, Atsumori explains that the Great Kamo Deity was so moved by the fervency of Little Atsumori's prayers that he asked King Enma, the judge of the dead, to allow Atsumori to return to this world for a short while to see his son. Ōshima 1974, p. 293.

sleep or are reborn. Each reawakening or rebirth symbolizes the reaching of a higher stage of maturity and understanding.²⁴ For Little Atsumori, the world is indeed a different place when he awakes: the outside storm has abated, and on the inside, he has made his peace with a ghost from his past. He gathers his father's bones from the grass, hangs them around his neck and returns to the capital, where he inters each at a different temple or sacred site. As an orphan, Little Atsumori had been unable to fulfill his filial duty to his father; likewise, his father had been unable to receive prayers from his son. With his identity restored, however, he performs his role as a virtuous son, and as the story ends, he becomes a venerable Pure Land priest.

So what, then, can *Ko-Atsumori* tell us about *The Tale of the Heike*? By focusing on Atsumori's confession of his name and the later effects of that revelation on Kumagae and Little Atsumori, the *Ko-Atsumori* author suggests that the *Heike* episode is not so much about Kumagae's religious awakening or the powers of music as it is about the profound bonds of trust that can form between enemies in the most unlikely situations. The early-fourteenth-century *Enkyō-bon* text of *The Tale of the Heike* records Kumagae and Atsumori's exchange as follows. Moved by Atsumori's youth and gentility, Kumagae speaks before cutting off his head:²⁵

"Whose son are you?" Kumagae asked.

"Cut me now, quick!" the youth simply replied.

Again, Naozane spoke: "I pity you, left here among the rabble. Give me your name in full, and I'll be sure to hold services for you. I can, because the Lord Assistant Commander of the Military Guards has said that any man who kills a fine opponent will have a thousand hectares' reward. Those lands—I'll think of them as coming from you. I am Kumagae no Jirō Naozane, resident of Musashi Province."

"To be shown such consideration," Atsumori thought, "though we've never met, or ever been close! I am grateful for that. I will surely be killed if I tell him my name, and likewise if I don't. Either way I'm certain to die, so there's nothing untoward in what he says."

Atsumori spoke: "I am Atsumori of the fifth court rank, sixteen years old, youngest son of Master of the Office of

²⁴ Bettleheim 1976, p. 214.

²⁵ Kitahara and Ogawa 1990, vol. 2, pp. 265-66. The *Enkyō-bon* is so named because it dates from around the second or third year of the Enkyō era (1308-1311).

Palace Repairs Tsunemori. My father is the younger brother of the Chancellor Novice [Kiyomori]. Now finish me, quick.”

As a sudden act of kindness, Kumagae promises to use the income he will receive for taking Atsumori's life to sponsor rites for Atsumori's future rebirth. Surprised by his adversary's generosity, Atsumori places him in his trust—a trust not to abuse his dignity in death by slandering or making light of his name—and he tells him who he is. By exploring the link between Kumagae and Atsumori's son in the years to come, *Ko-Atsumori* suggests that it is this battlefield bond that, if not the principal subject of the *Heike* Atsumori account, is the thematic element most worthy of consideration.

CONCLUSION

The study of spin-off otogizōshi, noh, and other derivative works as a hermeneutical approach to their antecedent texts—the Heian and medieval literary ‘classics’—is a generally promising one, offering insights into both the parent texts and the ways in which those texts were read and understood by later audiences. In the case of *The Tale of the Heike* alone, there are nearly a dozen otogizōshi based on different episodes in the work.²⁶ When one considers the number and variety of medieval sources that take as their subject the imagined lives and adventures of such literary and martial figures as Ariwara no Narihira, Ono no Komachi, Izumi Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, Koshikibu no Naishi, Murasaki Shikibu, Saigyō, Yoshitsune, Benkei, and Mongaku, the number increases dramatically. Like *Ko-Atsumori* on *The Tale of the Heike*, many of these sources may be read for potentially new perspectives on their originary texts.

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²⁶ *Heike*-related otogizōshi of which I am aware include *Giō*, *Heike hanazoroe*, *Heike kindachi sōshi*, *Ko-Atsumori*, *Koizuka monogatari*, *Ohara gokō no sōshi*, *Saeda no fue monogatari*, *Rokudai*, *Rokudai gozen monogatari*, *Yokobue sōshi*, and *Yuya monogatari*. For synopses, see Tokuda 2002(b).

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