“Strangers Within: Nōin shū and the Canonical Status of Private Poetry Collections”

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PAJLS 1:
Issues of Canonicity and Canon Formation in Japanese Literary Studies.
Introduction: The Making of a Canonical Genre

The Problem: Canonical Genres and Textual Identity

This paper concerns a small problem with broad ramifications. As is evidently true for others at this conference, from work on a single text I have come to identify a larger issue relating to the matter of canon. Specifically, I have been working on Nōin Hōshi’s 能因法師 shikashū 私家集 (i.e., the personal  waka 和歌 anthology of the mid-Heian 平安-era monk Nōin, born 988, died after 1052—more on him and his work in a while), and the problem that presented itself was one of genre.

In trying to understand the reception history of Nōin’s anthology, I came to the conclusion (perhaps obvious in itself?) that canonical genre categories may determine, in large part, our readings of classical texts. Moreover, this is not a new phenomenon but can be traced back to the earliest identifiable readings. To put it another way, classical texts are not free agents which can identify themselves as they wish; in fact, they have always been placed into canonical generic categories in order to be read. This is true of all literary works up to a point—a text or form does not appear sui generis, but even if it did, we as readers would attempt to classify it in order to approach an understanding of it. But in the case of classical works, the problem of assigned identity is compounded by the weight of history; a new reading must overcome tremendous inertia which a contemporary or even a relatively young established work simply does not carry.

I will get to Nōin shortly, but to begin I would like to identify some of the salient characteristics of what I will term the shikashū identity problem and then look at the approaches used by various U.S. and British scholars in bringing works from this awkward category into English. After these general points I’ll consider the specific case of Nōin’s anthology and note how the genre trap denied it a perceptive reading from its own time on down until
late in the twentieth century. Then, to conclude, I have some questions and suggestions for future research.

Shikashū: What Does the Term Mean?

The term *shikashū* is of remarkably late origin—it first appears in *Shōwa* 昭和 7 (1932), in an essay by Matsuda Takeo 松田武夫— but the understanding of its frame of reference dates back to the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 era, deriving ultimately from Chinese anthologies which were the collected works of individual poets. The term covers any collection of poetry which focuses on a particular person, though there is no claim to completeness (cf. *zenshū* 全集) or exclusivity (such as we anticipate in a Western “works of a particular poet”—this is more a case of works by or ascribed to, or sent to, or even just loosely related to a poet).

Although the concept was old, there had always been considerable vagueness in traditional terminology for such collections. From early times [poet’s name] *ga* *shū* [歌人]が集 worked for relatively focused collections, for works about, by, attributed to, or otherwise connected to, a named poet. By contrast, *kashū* 歌集 = *uta no shū* うた に 義 was completely open to definition and might have no specific focus. From the *Kokinshū* 古今集 era on, the usage *ie no shū* 家の集 (also *kashū* 家集) was established, again borrowed from *kanshi* 漢詩 collections—this time those of early Heian poets. With the term *ie no shū* 家の 集 comes a connection with family and implicitly with the prestige of a particular house. This in turn hints at the contemporary understanding of the purpose of these collections, but with the rise of the *chokusenshū* 勧撰集 in the eleventh century, this understanding was to undergo a significant change—rather than aiming for personal/family prestige by themselves, the *ie no shū* 家の集 came to represent a bid for family

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1 Matsuda himself discusses this in his 1964 article, “‘Shikashū’ to iu kotoba ga dekita koro,” *Nihon kotenbungaku taikai* 国文学会 2.6 (with the *Heian kamakura shikashū* volume of *Nihon kotenbungaku* 国文学会), 3-5.

2 For example, *Denshi kashū* 田氏家集 by Shimada no Tadaomi 島田忠臣 (828-891).
prestige through their offering materials for inclusion in imperial anthologies.³

But I’m getting ahead of myself. As implied above, even while chokusenshū were creating the paradigm of poetic canonicity for the tradition from the mid-Heian era on, at the same time they spurred renewed interest in private collections through their need for “raw materials.” Numerous anthologies (Nōin’s included) bear overt or silent (circumstantial) witness to this new interest. However, when we look carefully at the historical record, it is clear that individual poets continued to seek ways of fixing their own poetic output into larger structures even without the specific impetus of an imperial call for submissions. Again, Nōin’s anthology is a case in point: while he apparently edited his work in the hopes of contributing to an apparently imminent imperial collection, he also worked to produce something that stood independent of that arena (the preface to Nōin shū and his compiling a second collection, Gengenshū 玄々集, together make his intentions on this reasonably clear).⁴

Naturally enough, when the goal of a shikashū was not primarily to win places for poems in a chokusenshū, there were fewer restrictions on how a poem might be presented (and read). It seems that competition for house/family or personal prestige thus allied with artistic expressive needs to produce a wide range of anthological structures. Incidentally, from the start this movement was also bound up in the development of vernacular narrative (Lady Ise’s anthology, Ise shū 伊勢集, of c. 920 is a good example here). Nōin’s work was produced after the narrative tradition had achieved its early peak with the remarkable Genji monogatari 源氏物語 (c. 1010), but still it must be read in that context as well as that of the more narrowly poetic tradition.

Aside from the demands of art and the desire for fame, there were also practical reasons for the creation of private anthologies. Aspiring poets and

³ See the Kokinshū preface for an early indication of this practice. Stefania Burk’s paper at this conference (“Political License and the Poetic Canon of the Imperial Waka Anthologies”) makes very clear the political aspect of canonical role of chokusenshū.

⁴ I will discuss this in more detail in a forthcoming paper (planned for AAS/New England Fall 2000) on the relationship between Gengenshū, and similar shisenshū, and the chokusenshū corpus.
junior courtiers wanted model collections to assist them in their training and tools to help develop a sense of the personal styles of the great poets (poetry criticism from the Kokinshū Preface onward pays attention to matters of individual style and tone). With these multiple motives the resulting corpus of private poetry collection texts grew steadily, often with retroactive compilation of anthologies for those who had not made their own (tasen as opposed to jisen).

About a thousand years ago, Fujiwara no Kintō made the first great gesture of canonization of individual poets through selected poems with his listing of the “36 Immortal Poets” (sanjūrokken). Within a decade or two, all the poets he listed came to have their own collections, known together as the Sanjūrokuninshū (note the simple term shū for these private collections).

For the remainder of the Heian era and beyond, the development of this personal anthologizing continued, creating a very large number and range of materials. For example, one authoritative compendium—the Shikashū taisei, published in 8 volumes, 1973-76—lists over 170 different poets from the Heian era as having extant personal anthologies (this does not include substantially variant texts, e.g., tasen and jisen collections for the same poet).

But in time, along with the production of these private texts, there came to be implicit agreement as to their function, based on the chokusenshū-centered paradigm. From the point of view of senior establishment poets, they were raw materials for imperial collections or guidebooks for junior poets. There was just no place for a rival anthological form in the court-centered literary world.

One way personal poetry collections could escape from this artistic sidelining was to employ a deliberate confusion of identity. Creating a strong narrative aspect through extensive use of prose headnotes (kotobagaki...
could lead to a collection of poetry being seen as a member of another established and eventually canonical genre, e.g., diary (nikki 紫式部集), or even a tale (monogatari). To add to the confusion, some clearly fictional works were cast as kashū (e.g., [Ono no] Takamura shū/monogatari nikki 小野篁集・篁物語・篁日記). The poetry collection as [auto]biography developed as part of this sideways move, but predictably, to the extent that prose was included as essential to the identity of a collection, the poetry itself tended to be reduced in importance.

This desperate measure of adopting alternate identities is perhaps an understandable one given the inevitable derogation of anything that accepted the self-definition of “mere raw materials.” Two alternative approaches were to mimic the canonical form, arranging verses in associative/progressive (but not strictly narrative) sequences or to impose a simpler order on the jumble of raw materials by following canonical topic categories (Wakan rōeishū 和漢朗詠集 and Kokinwaka rokujō 古今和歌六帖 offered well-known specific sets of topic lists)—thus making the work of the eventual chokusenshū compiler, looking for a suitable poem for a particular topic, that much easier.7

But these various responses to the problem of weak or non-existent generic identity have in turn posed a challenge for modern interpreters of these works, encumbered as we are with the concept of shikashū as a significant or defining generic category for so large a part of the classical waka corpus. I would like next to turn to a look at how scholars have fared in disentangling individual works from this identity complex.

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7 As part of a longer term shikashū project I am compiling a database which will provide a clear sense of which was most common of these approaches. I would like to hear from anyone else interested in a similar survey (focused on Heian and early Kamakura texts). Thus far I can note that many shikashū offer a mixture of anthological structures, indicating occasional but unsustained attempts at editing or perhaps suggesting that a shikashū can function as a collection of smaller works—Izumi shikibu shū 和泉式部集 is a good example of this.
Scholarly Approaches to the Genre

*Kokubungaku* Studies. I have to begin this section with a caveat. For reasons which will become clear, I have not considered attempts by *kokubungaku* scholars to present such works to modern and contemporary audiences. In a longer presentation I would address this in more depth, but it is not only shortage of time that prevents me from covering it here. This may be stating the obvious, but there is an important difference between studies in Japanese and those written in other languages: there is no need to explain the term *shikashū* in Japanese. The *kanji* make some sense by themselves; no translation is needed. Thus it is possible to work in Japanese without problematizing the issue of genre. Outside of Japanese, though, the term has to be explained and/or translated somehow, and thus a discussion of its meaning usually follows.

A further point regarding traditional (*kokubungaku*) scholarship: there has been a tendency for *shikashū* to be used as raw materials in another sense, to create the biography of a poet. But gleaning this sort of data from texts that are likely to be structured along primarily literary lines can easily mislead: imagine how it would be if we (still) took Matsuo Bashō’s *Okuno hosomichi* as a literal record of his epic journey!

*Western Language Studies.* As is clear even from the incomplete list given in Appendix I ("Some *Shikashū* Studies and Translations"), there has been a steady stream of book-length treatments of *shikashū*, each time requiring of the scholar-translator an essay on the nature of the work at hand.8

Edwin Cranston deals with *shikashū* in his essay exploring the genealogy of autobiography, fictional narrative, and poetry collections in the court era.9 He concludes by placing the *Izumi Shikibu nikki* somewhere between the first two, but in making a distinction between them and *shū*, he writes: "[*nikki*] are not really in danger of being mistaken for mere poetry collections." At the risk of wringing an unintended meaning from his essay, I would suggest that Cranston’s "mere" is telling. It implies, given the importance of prose in his definition of the autobiographical or narrative form,

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8 I have not treated Western works in other languages than English, though they will be a part of the next part of this study.
9 Cranston 1969.
that a poetry collection lacking in prose can never match the literary heights of a *nikki*. Those *shikashū* that include much narrative prose are by definition more than *shikashū*; they are *nikki*-like or *monogatari*-like. Thus Cranston’s argument ultimately avoids the question of *shikashū* identity in its own terms, seeking instead another form (*nikki*) growing out of the first. This teleological slant, understandable in a work on *nikki*, becomes a more serious problem in essays by other scholars on the *shikashū* genre.

Next in the list of recent studies is the translation by Phillip Harries of *Kenreimon'in ukyō no daibu shū* 聖礼門院右京の太夫集. ¹⁰ Harries treats Lady Daibu’s poetic memoirs (his term) as a *shikashū* rather than a *nikki*, for all the work’s journal-like qualities, and thus necessitates a valuation of the *shikashū* genre. But here again the analysis dodges the issue, hinging instead on the notion of “a proper autobiographical collection”—implying that there are improper or insufficient ones. In fact he examines a number of works at length, and any text that (not surprisingly) differs greatly from the model Lady Daibu creates is deemed somehow inadequate. The underlying assumption, predictable given the history of the genre, is that a *shikashū* per se can have little merit and that it acquires value by approaching some other category of literature—in this case something like Western autobiography.

I don’t have time today to look at all of the works listed, but suffice it to say that all of these studies spend a great deal of effort first explaining what *shikashū* are and then how the particular work under study somehow rises above the limitations of the genre. Robert Borgen is the only one to significantly qualify his praise for the text he translates by noting that it is only a “minor” piece in the tradition, for all that it is appealingly dramatic and a remarkably individual piece of work.¹¹ His apologetic tone is belied by the warmth of his reading, however.¹²

The operation of the invidious influence of the term *shikashū* is evident, I suggest, in all of these studies. If the texts being translated had not been defined as *shikashū*—inferior genre—in the first place, their own identity

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¹⁰ Harries 1980.
¹¹ Borgen 1996.
¹² Borgen’s review of two translations/studies by Kamens (Borgen 1992) questions of the value of translations of “obscure works” from the Japanese tradition, so unabashed enthusiasm in his own study would perhaps have seemed hypocritical.
could have been more self-confidently displayed and explored. But the weight of the tradition is not easily shrugged off.

**Reading Nōin and his Shikashū**

*A New Approach to the Problem of Genre*

Now to move to the text that has been the object of my study—Nōin shū. As I have said, the genre identity of the text posed a challenge from the start, and I encountered the same problems as earlier scholars. Though I found *Nōin shū* a fascinating and intricately worked text, to invoke the category of *shikashū* seemed to preclude the sort of reading that might do it justice. But before spending time attempting to carve out a special place for Nōin's work among "more ordinary *shikashū*," I thought there might be a simpler (albeit radical) solution: to call into question the entire notion of *shikashū*.

Perhaps this is to take a sledgehammer to a very small nut, yet as this conference has proceeded I have been bolstered also by the variety of revisionist approaches suggested in other papers. We have discussed an array of troubles associated with matters of genre and canonicity; one result is to confirm, I believe, that the apparently innocuous concept of *shikashū* is now a fair target. The full implications of this discovery need to be explored: how many "*shikashū*" have been misread or ignored because of bad generic mapping? But it was immediately evident to me that Nōin's work, for one, has long suffered from the *shikashū/chokusenshū* paradigm. In the remainder of this paper I shall try to make this clear through a description of why he wrote his anthology and what happened to it when he did.

**The Poet and His Work**

As you may know, Nōin was a *zuryō* poet born in 988. This date, as with almost all the historical information we have about him, is derived from his *shikashū*, which he compiled around 1046-48. The collection survives in only three manuscripts—two of which are very closely related (one is likely a copy of the other, though which is which is unclear). The text is known as *Nōin [Hōshi] shū*, includes 256 verses, and is arranged in

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13 For an extensive discussion of the textual history of *Nōin shū*, see Kawashima Teruo 1979.
three booklets. These correspond roughly to the three stages of life—youth, maturity and old age. Thus the anthology readily lends itself to a reading that is at least chronological, if not autobiographical. There is also a preface in Chinese in which Nōin states his purpose in compiling the collection: evidently he saw waka poetry as being in decline, and he wished to provide a model for posterity, even if only using his own “inadequate” verses (in fact he also compiled Gengenshū from the works of great poets of his lifetime as a more catholic and objective model). 14

From Nōin shū and a few later sources we know that Nōin took the tonsure in early adulthood after completing training in Letters (monjō 文章) at the Academy (daigaku 大学); that he traveled extensively, making friends and a living through his expert knowledge of horses and poetry. The regent Fujiwara no Yorimichi 藤原賴通 thought well of his poetry, according to one set of anecdotes, though Nōin appears never to have secured (or been interested in?) an official position at court or in a palace salon. His career as a court poet peaked after the compilation of his shikashū, though he was already well known by the 1030s. According to extant accounts he was not as successful in court poetry matches as his chokusenshū record might lead one to expect. 15 The date of his death is not documented, but he is mentioned in contemporary sources as late as 1052 (when he would have been 64).

What marks Nōin’s text out as awkward even beyond the genre-crossing nikki/monogatari collections is the fact that, for all its chronological structure and rich cast of characters and locales, there is an almost complete lack of kanabun 仮名文 kotobagaki, the vernacular prose (“foretext,” as Richard Okada has nicely termed it) that makes more of a shikashū than a “mere poetry collection.” When Nōin does include much by way of foretext, it tends to be in Chinese. Moreover, the collection does not even include some

14 The prefaces to Nōin shū and to Gengenshū are both translated in my Ph.D dissertation, “Poetic Licence: Nōin shū and the way of waka” (Harvard University, in progress).
15 While he is the best-represented male poet in GoShūishū (1086), his utaawase verses tended to lose, perhaps as a result of Nōin's political position. See my dissertation for details on this and his life as a poet and a discussion of anecdotal and historical sources.
of his most famous verses (which postdate its compilation). Small wonder, then, that the text was apparently read only by his disciples (the Waka rokinin tō or Gang of Six Poets) and a few other professional poets. A few generations later it disappeared from the literary map, leaving only stories and fragments in other collections to remember Nōin by.

Reception and (Re-)Discovery

It happens that in the 1930s Nōin’s collection resurfaced, the first report coming from Shimizu Fumio in 1934. Once put into print, though, it appeared unremarkable, one of many shikashū that were being made more widely available but which were not seen as significant literary works in themselves. Indeed, Shimizu’s interest appears to be historical rather than literary. Nōin had included precious little kanabun to tell the story framing the poetry, and the anthology is peppered instead with knotty kanbun 漢文. It also lacks Nōin’s “best” verses (as noted above), and its better verses had anyway been culled for use in chokusenshū (Nōin became—posthumously—the third most prolific contributor to Goshuisshū, after Izumi Shikibu and Sagami, and his poetry reappears in numerous later chokusenshū) and were thus already known. So, despite the curiosity of the simple fact of the text’s rediscovery, what can we possibly be missing if we ignore Nōin’s shikashū?

Against questions and preconceptions like this, it is truly remarkable that the text survived into the twentieth century. But therein is a curious irony: it was, I would argue, precisely because it was a shikashū, one of those works associated with the chokusenshū-centered tradition of court poetry, that Nōin’s collection did survive almost intact, in no fewer than three different locations (the three MSS mentioned above were all in different collections). The texts were even in good enough shape to permit a secure reconstruction of the whole work some nine hundred years after the poet launched it into the world under the troubled shikashū flag. But, irony aside, what was it that Nōin did with a small (by contemporary standards) collection of poetry that then made it so fascinating to me and to several Japanese scholars who have also studied the text?

16 See, for example, his Hyakunin isshu 百人一首 verse, “Arashi fuku…” (#70 in that collection); it was composed for a poetry match in Eishō 永承 4 (1049).
17 See Shimizu 1934.
There is not time today to share specific examples from the text, but the careful arrangement of poems, poem sets, and the short kotobagaki in Chinese (written in Chinese to contrast the subordinate prose from the all-important poetry); thematic sequencing buttressing the overall chronological flow; the inclusion of miniature narrative sequences, foreshadowing, and echoes from earlier poems within the text—all contribute to an intense aesthetic experience in reading and rereading this anthology, to say nothing of the emotional aspect. Besides all these there is also Nōin’s creation of a basically narrative structure despite the lack of discursive prose—he endows the poems, by their positioning, with narrative power, using what I would like to term the narrative mode of lyric poetry (inverting Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen’s terms18). Thus he makes his story, and through it his personal experience, accessible to those who will listen, even a thousand years after he composed it.

All this is missed in readings that focus on the poems out of context (raw materials theory) or look for a kana prose diary with poems (altered identity theory). As is so often the case with traditional Japanese poetry, context is key, and despite inherited assumptions to the contrary, the sorts of works we now call shikashū represent a (variety of) legitimate context(s). Of course it may seem a precariously expedient step for my purposes, to see the configuration of this highly heterogeneous genre as an indication of inadequate taxonomy rather than of a succession of inadequate texts, but in time I believe further supporting evidence will be forthcoming. The papers presented at this conference will surely inspire many more to seek canon-related politics behind such a poor taxonomy as this one—and there are doubtless analogous cases elsewhere in the historiography of literature and art.

Conclusion: The Case for Reinterpretation

Once we see the shikashū/chokusenshū system for the centralizing dialectic that it is, we are bound to at least consider the wholesale demolition of the notion of shikashū. Its diminishing characterization of many dozens of works has, while keeping them safe for posterity, kept them safely from posterity as well. The time has come to pull them out from behind their traditional screen and see what range of genres really existed inside the totaliz-

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18 Ramirez-Christensen 1982.
ing shikashū concept. From my own limited reading of his contemporaries, I know that Nōin was not alone in his experimentation with anthological form and the wider potential of waka. In recent years kokubun scholars have published prodigious amounts of fundamental commentary and textual studies on a wide range of shikashū (our keynote speaker Professor Kubota is overseeing an ongoing series from Meiji shoin that promises to add still further to the corpus of annotated texts¹⁹). As scholars around the world begin to reconsider the picture of classical literature in the light of these efforts, now is the time to rethink even the categories into which we have always, all too easily, placed so many of these independent literary works.

APPENDIX I

Some Shikashū Studies And Translations

Arranged in order of publication. Title of original shikashū in parentheses.


¹⁹ I refer here to the Waka bungaku taikei series, which has already produced editions of several sets of shikashū (e.g., v. 20, which includes Sei Shōnagon’s and Kamo Yasunori no Musume’s collections). Also worthy of note here is a series from the the publisher Kazama shobo, the excellent Shikashū zenshaku sōsho.


**APPENDIX IIa**
A list of the *shikashū* included in Iwanami Shoten’s *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* volume of 1964 (Hisamatsu Senichi et al., eds., *Heian Kamakura shikashū*):

- Yoshitada shū
- Izumi shikibu shū
- *Dainagon Tsunenobu shū* (also includes excerpt from Shun’rai’s *Sanbokukikashū*)
- Chōshū eisō
- Shokushi naishinnō shū
- Ken’reimon’in ukyō no daibu shū
- Shunzei kyō no musume shū

→ Total of seven works for approx. 250-year range (ca. 960-1210), with a clear focus on the *ShinKokinshū* era.

**APPENDIX IIb**
A list of the *shikashū* included in Iwanami Shoten’s *Shin nihon koten bungaku taikei* volume of 1994 (Inukai Kiyoshi, Goō Shōko, and Hirano Yukiko, eds, *Heian shikashū*):

- *Ise shū*
- *Higaki no ouna shū*
- *Ichijō sesshō gyoshū*
- *Anpō hōshi shū*
- *Sanekata shū*
- *Yoshitada shū*
Total of nine works for approx. 170-year range (ca 900 to 1070); focus evenly spread over early and mid-Heian. The SNKBT series has a separate volume for medieval shikashū.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


