

TRAVEL WRITING FROM HELL? MINAMOTO NO YORIE AND  
THE POLITICS OF *FUJI NO HITOANA SŌSHI*

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Within the fantastic world of late-medieval Japanese prose fiction, extraordinary, supernatural, or otherwise improbable journeys are the norm. Whether the eponymous Urashima Tarō's visit to the underwater palace of the Dragon King, or Minamoto no Yoshitsune's *Odyssey*-like voyage to the islands of horse-people, naked people, and miniature people in *On-zōshi shima watari*, *otogizōshi* travelers' tales frequently concern themselves with the transcendence of mundane boundaries and the exploration of superhuman spaces.<sup>1</sup> Within the corpus of imaginative travel narratives is a sub-genre of stories concerning human travelers' journeys to the realms of hell, animals, hungry ghosts, and other non-human planes.<sup>2</sup> As a rule, these stories include vividly detailed descriptions of the ghastly punishments to be found in those places, as well as ample and often sectarian religious advice on how readers and listeners might avoid visiting there themselves. Among the longest and most harrowing of these late-medieval hell-tour tales is an *otogizōshi* by the name of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi*, "The Tale of the Fuji Cave," which in its central section purports to describe the shocking journey of a Kamakura-period samurai to the depths of hell and back.

While the origins of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* are largely obscure, the work is known to have existed in some written form from at least 1527, because the Kyoto courtier Yamashina Tokitsugu records in a diary entry from that year that he presented a copy to a "new lady of the Handmaid's Office," at her request.<sup>3</sup> Today, *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* survives in an unusually large number of Edo-period manuscripts, indicating its immense popularity among readers in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. The earliest of these extant *Fuji* texts—six hand-copied manuscripts that pre-date the widely reproduced 1627 woodblock-printed

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<sup>1</sup> *Urashima Tarō* 浦島太郎 and *On-zōshi shima watari* 御曹子島渡 are annotated in Ichiko 1991, pp. 337–45 and 102–23.

<sup>2</sup> Prominent examples in the *otogizōshi* genre include *Mokuren no sōshi* 目連の草紙, *Daibutsu no go-engi* 大仏の御縁起, *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* 富士の人穴草子, *Tengu no dairi* 天狗の内裏, and *Chōhōji yomigaeri no sōshi* 長宝寺よみがへりの草紙.

<sup>3</sup> *Tokitsugu-kyō ki* 言繼卿記, entry for the twenty-sixth day of the first month of Daiei 7 大永七年 (1527). Cited in Ichiko 1998, p. 76b.

edition—are unique in both their phrasing and their organization of tortures on the protagonist’s tour of hell, suggesting their likely roots in an oral narrative tradition.<sup>4</sup> Nishino Toshiko has proposed that the story circulated in the Muromachi period in the repertoires of *zatō* 座頭 (blind minstrel priests), who are specifically praised within the work, and *etoki bikuni* 絵解き比丘尼 (picture-explaining nuns), some of whom are known to have preached using elaborate paintings of heavens and hells, and who may have been married to *zatō* (Nishino 1971, pp. 42a–43b). Koyama Issei has more recently argued that the *Fuji* narrative was recited by medieval *yamabushi* 山伏 mountain ascetics and, possibly, mendicant *miko* 巫女 (shamanesses, or shrine maidens) from the Fuji mountain region (Koyama 1983, pp. 38 and 48–50). Whatever the case may have been, scholars agree that *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* is rooted in a medieval Buddhist storytelling and proselytizing tradition, as its gruesomely didactic contents so clearly suggest.

Despite *Fuji no hitoana sōshi*’s obvious and outlandish fictionality, the living human characters that it describes are all actual historical figures. Set in the reign of the second Kamakura shōgun, Minamoto no Yoriie, the story revolves around Yoriie and his purportedly disastrous obsession with a mysterious cave on the side of Mount Fuji. Characters within the tale include Wada Yoshimori, Wada Tanenaga, Asahina Yoshihide, and Nitta Tadatsune, all of whom are known to historians of the Kamakura period for their various roles in the bloody conflict between the parties of Hōjō Tokimasa, on the one hand, and Yoriie and his heirs, on the other, in the ten-year period between 1203 and 1213.<sup>5</sup> *Fuji no hitoana sōshi*’s inclusion of these personae imbues it with political overtones that other late-medieval hell-tour travel narratives lack. In this paper, I intend to draw upon the thirteenth-century historical chronicle *Azuma kagami* 吾妻鏡 in order to illuminate the probable evolution of the *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* story, as well as to highlight the

<sup>4</sup> Nishino 1971, pp. 40b–42a; Koyama 1983, p. 47. The six early texts are the five listed in Nishino 1971, p. 38b, and the late Muromachi-period Keiō University manuscript, typeset in Ishikawa 1997.

<sup>5</sup> For brief biographies of Minamoto no Yoriie 源頼家 (1182–1204), Wada Yoshimori 和田義盛 (1147–1213), Wada Tanenaga 和田胤長 (1183–1213), Asahina (also “Asaina”) Yoshihide 朝比奈義秀 (b. 1176), and Hōjō Tokimasa 北条時政 (1138–1215), see *Kokushi daijiten* 1979–93, 13: 428, 14: 925, 14: 913, 1: 120, and 12: 605–606. Nitta Tadatsune 仁田忠常 (d. 1203) is somewhat more obscure; he is best known for his participation in the assassination of Yoriie’s father-in-law, Hiki Yoshikazu 比企能員 (d. 1203), in the ninth month of Kennin 3 建仁三年 (1203). See Shimura and Suwa 2000, p. 711.

vestigial political subtext that survives in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century transcriptions of the tale.

#### NARRATING HELL

In summary, the plot of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* is as follows:

In the fourth month of 1201, the shōgun Minamoto no Yoriie commands his retainer Wada no Heida Tanenaga to explore a strange cave on the side of Mount Fuji. Tanenaga does as he is told, but after making his way past a frightening mass of snakes, he encounters a beautiful young weaver-woman who prophesies his death and orders him to leave. Tanenaga reports back to Yoriie, who then sends a second man, Nitta no Shirō Tadatsune. “Nitta,” as he is referred to in the tale, finds no woman weaving at a loom; instead, he discovers a wondrous world containing a fantastic palace: the abode of the Great Asama Bodhisattva, the resident deity of Mount Fuji. Appearing at first as an enormous snake, the Bodhisattva rages at Nitta for Nitta’s violation of his sacred space. However, he is quickly mollified by a gift of Nitta’s swords, and changing his appearance to that of a teenage boy, he offers to lead Nitta on a grand tour of the Six Realms of Transmigratory Existence (the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, *ashura*, humans, and heaven) before returning him to his home in the human world.<sup>6</sup> Nitta and the Bodhisattva thus set out upon their tour—a mostly hideous journey comprising some two-thirds of the entire tale—after which the Bodhisattva commands Nitta to say nothing to Yoriie about what he has seen for a period of three years and three months. Should Nitta violate his order, the Bodhisattva explains, both Nitta and Yoriie will lose their lives. Nitta returns to the shōgun and warns him of his injunction, but Yoriie compels him to speak. Nitta therefore tells his tale and falls dead on the spot. A voice calls out from above that Yoriie, too, is doomed.

As any reader of the story can see, *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* is dominated by its graphic and disturbing descriptions of the many tortures of hell. Its larger tale of Yoriie’s obsession with the Fuji cave functions as little more than an expedient frame. The locating of the narrative in the historical past would seem to have been intended as a mechanism for enhancing the credibility of Nitta’s ostensibly “true” tour of hell.

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<sup>6</sup> The *ashura* 阿修羅 realm is a world of never-ending battle. It is generally reserved for those who die in battle or as a result of violence.

Nitta begins his journey at the Children's Riverbed Hell, a place where little children are burned and brutalized for the sin of having died before they could repay their obligations to their mothers. Next, the Bodhisattva leads Nitta past the Sanzu River, where Datsueba, the "clothes-snatching hag," strips passing sinners of their robes and their skin. Continuing past *Shide no yama*, the Mountain of Death, they soon arrive at the Crossroads of the Six Realms. The written record of Nitta's tour constitutes a veritable catalogue of contemporary social transgressions and their imagined punishments, emphasizing, in particular, the supposed sins and sufferings of women and bad priests. The *Fuji* narrator displays a seemingly fetishistic fascination with female torture and suffering, from the woman who is sawn in half at the crotch for falling in love with one man while being committed to another, to the woman who has nails pounded into the bones of her hips for having had multiple sexual partners in the course of her life.<sup>7</sup> The punishments are often symbolic of the crimes: the first woman is divided at her genitals as a result of her divided sexual loyalties, and the second woman has the same number of nails (read: iron phalluses) driven into her hips and pelvis as the number of her lovers. Other notable examples include a woman who has her tongue pulled out for making false accusations; a woman who has the skin of her face peeled back and burning oil dripped on the flesh underneath for having used cosmetics in order to make herself more attractive to men; and a woman in elegant robes who rips apart her own flesh and feeds it to demons for having engaged in prostitution.<sup>8</sup>

In a typical passage from the 1603 *Fuji* manuscript, the narrator explains:

To the side, Nitta saw demon wardens flogging a sinner who was burdened with a heavy stone. With cries of, "Climb! Climb!" demons were hounding countless others up the jagged sides of iron boulders. The Bodhisattva explained: "These are people who overloaded horses in the course of doing business. They reveled in their profits and callously worked their animals to death. They'll suffer constantly like this for eighteen thousand years. Nitta, tell everyone in the human world: never

<sup>7</sup> Yokoyama and Matsumoto 1983, pp. 439a and 468a (1603 and 1627 *Fuji* texts).

<sup>8</sup> Yokoyama and Matsumoto 1983, pp. 441a, 439a–b, and 439a (1603 *Fuji* text). Concerning the last of these examples, Marina Warner has written that "in myth and fairy tale, the metaphor of devouring often stands in for sex" (Warner 1994, p. 259). The woman's act of feeding herself to demons is thus suggestive of her former profession.

overload a horse just because it can't speak. You'll go to hell if you do."

Nitta saw some sinners being skewered upon the points of blades. With shouts of, "Climb! Climb!" demons were chasing them up the Mountain of Swords. Their flesh fell in pieces like shreds of deep-dyed crimson cloth. "These are people who didn't repay their obligations to their masters and parents in the human world," the Bodhisattva explained. "This is their punishment for failing to settle down, and for speaking badly of their masters and parents."

To the west, Nitta saw a place where demons were forcing people through towering waves of fire and water. The demons were affixing iron shackles to the people's wrists and ankles, and in one place, they were pounding nails into each person's forty-four joints, eighty-three bones, and nine hundred million hair follicles. "What's this?" Nitta asked, to which the Bodhisattva replied, "These are the punishments for judiciary officials. They're doomed to suffer like this without relief. If there's anything that a person should avoid, it's becoming a judge."<sup>9</sup>

The descriptions of individual tortures tend to be short and to the point. Because *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* takes a relatively comprehensive approach to the issues of human sin and punishment, it allows for a playful sort of comparative analysis. For example, according to the 1607 *Fuji* manuscript, the duration of a man's punishment for bigamy is 7,300 years, just 40.56% of the duration of another man's punishment for mistreating a horse (18,000 years). Although there are great discrepancies in the stated durations of punishments among the different *Fuji* texts, it is nevertheless possible for the reader to achieve a general sense of the range of socially proscribed behaviors and their relative gravity as crimes. Thus, like most works of imaginative travel literature, *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* tells us more about the world of its author than about the fictional world that it purports to represent.

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<sup>9</sup> Yokoyama and Matsumoto 1983, pp. 437a–38a. The 1603 *Fuji* text is translated in Kimbrough 2006 (b), an online digital supplement to Kimbrough 2006 at the website of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*.

### OMINOUS ORIGINS

The historical Minamoto no Yoriie was born in Kamakura in 1182. He succeeded to the headship of his family in the first month of 1199, at the age of seventeen, upon the death of his father, Yoritomo. He was granted the title *sei taishōgun* 征夷大將軍, “barbarian-subduing generalissimo,” in the first month of 1202, but having run afoul of his maternal grandfather, Hōjō Tokimasa, he was obliged to retire in the ninth month of 1203. Then, in the seventh month of 1204, at the age of twenty-two, he was murdered by Tokimasa’s assassins and succeeded by his brother Sanetomo.<sup>10</sup>

Much of what we know about Yoriie’s short life and death is recorded in the thirteenth-century historical chronicle *Azuma kagami*, “The Mirror of the East.” As several scholars have observed, the *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* story was either inspired by a set of entries in this work, or else shares a common source with it. *Azuma kagami* reports that in the sixth month of 1203, Yoriie sent his retainer Wada no Heida Tanenaga to explore a “great cave” in a place called Itōzaki in Izu province. Tanenaga is said to have returned on the same day, after slaying what he claimed was a huge snake that tried to swallow him whole. Two days later, Yoriie is reported to have given Nitta no Shirō Tadatsune a precious sword and sent him to explore a different cavern, this one located on the side of Mount Fuji in neighboring Suruga province. Tadatsune led a party of six men, including himself; only two survived. As Tadatsune explained upon his return the following morning, after contending with darkness, bats, wet feet, and a passage “too narrow to turn around in,” the party came to a raging underground river. There they saw a mysterious apparition in the light of their torches, and four of Tadatsune’s men dropped dead. Tadatsune managed to escape by sacrificing his new sword, which he said he threw into the river in response to the apparition’s demand. The unknown *Azuma kagami* author concludes by quoting a wise old man (or men) who explained that the Fuji cave is the dwelling of the Great Asama Bodhisattva, the resident deity of Mount Fuji.<sup>11</sup>

Kadokawa Gen’yoshi has written about the *Azuma kagami* and *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* cave-stories, and he has argued that they share a

<sup>10</sup> The information in this paragraph is drawn from *Kokushi daijiten* 1979–93, 13: 428, and from Varley 1982. According to the traditional Japanese method of reckoning ages, Yoriie was twenty-three years old at the time of his death.

<sup>11</sup> Entries for the first, third, and fourth days of the sixth month of Kennin 3 (1203), in Kuroita 2004, p. 602, and Kishi 1977, pp. 78–79. The *Azuma kagami* entries for the third and fourth days are translated in Tyler 1993, p. 271.

common oral source.<sup>12</sup> Kadokawa points to the folkloric (*setsuwa*-esque) aspects of the *Azuma kagami* entries: Tanenaga's battle with the giant man-eating serpent, and Tadatsune's encounter with the deity who demands his sword. Kadokawa also observes that within *Azuma kagami*, the cave-stories are situated within a larger set of omen-tales foreshadowing Yoriie's death. For example, *Azuma kagami* reports that in the first month of 1203, five months before Tanenaga's and Tadatsune's cave explorations, Yoriie's son Ichiman received an oracle from the Great Hachiman Bodhisattva at Tsurugaoka Shrine to the effect that terrible events would soon transpire, and that he and his father were already doomed.<sup>13</sup> Then, according to three *Azuma kagami* entries for the sixth and seventh months of that year, a dove dropped dead from the ridge of the Wakamiya hall at Tsurugaoka Shrine; three doves fought at the shrine, and one of them died; and a beheaded dove was found under a water-offering shelf at a temple within the shrine.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Yoriie is reported to have fallen ill in the seventh month, and his diagnosis, according to a diviner, was "a deity's curse."<sup>15</sup> Based upon the contents of these omen-stories, Kadokawa posits that an oral folk tradition emerged in the sixty-odd years between Yoriie's death and the composition of *Azuma kagami*, and that it is this, rather than records of actual historical events, that came to be preserved in *Azuma kagami*.

If Kadokawa is correct in surmising that the *Azuma kagami* cluster of omen-stories is an edited and chronologically structured version of the *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* story as it circulated in the mid-to-late thirteenth century, then his conclusion suggests that in its earliest form, *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* (if we may still call it that) was not about hell at all: it was

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<sup>12</sup> Kadokawa 1975, pp. 408–416. Kadokawa also observes (p. 415) that the *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* cave story is structurally similar to an account in *Genpei jōsuiki* 源平盛衰記 (vol. 11) in which Taira no Shigemori 平重盛 (1138–1179) sends Naniwa no Rokurō Tsunetoshi 難波六郎経俊 to explore the mysterious pool of the Nunobiki 布引 waterfall in Harima province. See Matsuo 1993, pp. 165–68.

<sup>13</sup> Entry for the second day of the first month of Kennin 3 (1203), in Kuroita 2004, p. 600, and Kishi 1977, p. 74. The oracle states: "Events will transpire in the [eastern] Kantō [region] within the present year; the young master will not succeed to the headship of his clan. The tree on the embankment has already withered at its roots, but the people do not know this, and they wait upon the greenery at its top."

<sup>14</sup> Entries for the thirtieth day of the sixth month, and the fourth and ninth days of the seventh month of Kennin 3, in Kuroita 2004, pp. 602–603, and Kishi 1977, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Entries for the twentieth and twenty-third days of the seventh month of Kennin 3, in Kuroita 2004, p. 603, and Kishi 1977, pp. 79–80.

an omen-story foreshadowing Yoriie's death. This would be consistent with what we know of hell-tour tales as a genre, for as Koyama Issei has observed, *Fuji no hitoana sōshi*-type narratives that revel in their vivid and elaborate descriptions of the tortures of hell (as opposed to the more traditional *soseidan* 蘇生譚, or "back-from-the-dead"-type *setsuwa*, which focus on how people managed to *escape* from hell) tend to date from the mid-fourteenth through mid-seventeenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it would appear that rather than the Yoriie frame-tale having been appended to a horrific story of Nitta's exploration of the Fuji cave as a means of grounding it in the historical past, the lurid details of Nitta's journey were added to an earlier account of Yoriie's youthful demise. The evolutionary process is easy to imagine. Storytellers adapt their stories to suit the inclinations of their audiences, and as interest in the circumstances of Yoriie's death waned over the centuries, the thematic focus of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* naturally changed.

Although the *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* story came to be dominated in the Muromachi period by Nitta's tour of hell, traces of the original omen-theme remain, most prominently in the concluding section of the *otogizōshi* in which the disembodied voice of the Great Asama Bodhisattva prophecies Yoriie's death. In an earlier part of the tale, when Nitta first encounters the Bodhisattva at his palace in the Fuji cave, the Bodhisattva similarly declares that Yoriie's "luck has run out," but an astute reader will recognize that Yoriie's fate has in fact been sealed from the start. For when Wada no Heida Tanenaga, the first explorer, encounters the mysterious young woman weaving at a silver loom, she tells him that in the spring of his thirty-first year he will take up with "Koizumi no Kojirō Minamoto no Chikahira" and instigate a "groundless rebellion," for which he will be arrested, exiled, and later executed in a remote field in Michinoku province.<sup>17</sup> The woman's prophecy refers to the so-called "Izumi Chikahira disturbance"—a failed attempt in the second month of 1213 to install the late Yoriie's orphaned son Senju as shōgun—for which the historical Tanenaga did indeed lose his life, and which could not have occurred without Yoriie's earlier assassination.<sup>18</sup> Thus, despite the final dramatic scene in which Nitta emerges from the cave and appears before his lord, the end, for Yoriie, is never in doubt,

<sup>16</sup> Koyama 1983, p. 30. Koyama dates the proliferation of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi*-type hell-tour tales to the Nanbokuchō through early Edo periods (1336 through early seventeenth century).

<sup>17</sup> Yokoyama 1962, p. 320a (*Fuji* manuscript of 1607).

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the Izumi Chikahira Disturbance (*Izumi Chikahira no ran* 泉親衛の乱), see *Kokushi daijiten* 1979-93, 1: 560-61, and Varley 1982, pp. 154-55.

and like any true omen-story—a story of a prophetic sign and its fulfillment—*Fuji no hitoana sōshi* is a tale of an inevitable process, rather than of free choice or open-ended possibilities.

### CONCLUSION

What, then, are the political implications of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi*? In his probable manifestation as the young woman in the cave, the Great Asama Bodhisattva is unimpressed by Tanenaga's stated allegiance to the shōgun Yoriie. Furthermore, in the course of Nitta's tour, the Bodhisattva repeatedly emphasizes the importance of recognizing the ephemeral nature of this present human world. As the Bodhisattva explains, "though the present life is a dream within a dream, some people think that they'll live for a thousand or ten thousand years. They want more than what they already have, and wish to wear more than what they're already wearing. [These desires of theirs] are the seeds of hell."<sup>19</sup> When applied to rulers, the concept of evanescence suggests a fall, and by ascribing Yoriie's fall to his own reckless obsession with the Fuji cave, the authors and reciters of *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* would seem to have absolved Hōjō Tokimasa for his assassination of Yoriie in 1204. *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* is remarkably conservative in its social orientation—it advises listeners and readers to work hard, pay their taxes, honor their contracts, and "simply accept the world as it is"<sup>20</sup>—and it articulates a conformist political view as well, blaming the dead and discredited Yoriie for his own demise. This is perhaps to be expected, if in its earliest form the *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* story dates from in or before the time of *Azuma kagami*'s composition in the age of the Hōjō regents.

One final thought: the early fourteenth-century *Engyō-bon* 延慶本 text of *The Tale of the Heike* is unique among *Heike* manuscripts for its inclusion of a final hagiographic passage lauding Minamoto no Yoritomo for his glorious rule. The *Engyō-bon* narrator explains that Yoritomo "revived the Buddhist Law and succeeded to righteous rule, quelled an arrogant clan, comforted the populace in its distress, expelled those who were disloyal, and commended those who served him well, never discriminating between intimates and strangers, near or far. His deeds were awesome beyond compare."<sup>21</sup> Like *The Tale of the Heike*, which chronicles the downfall of Taira no Kiyomori and his clan, *Fuji no*

<sup>19</sup> Yokoyama and Matsumoto 1983, p. 448b (1603 *Fuji* text).

<sup>20</sup> Yokoyama and Matsumoto 1983, pp. 448b–49a (1603 *Fuji* text).

<sup>21</sup> Kitahara and Ogawa 1990, pp. 549–50. A nearly identical passage is contained in *Rokudai shōjiki* 六代勝事記 (ca. 1223–1224), in Yuge 2000, p. 73.

*hitoana sōshi* proclaims the fleeting nature of wealth, power, and worldly fame. Taking up where the *Heike* epic leaves off (or where the *Engyō-bon* leaves off), *Fuji no hitoana sōshi* describes the subsequent fall of the Genji, embodied in the figure of Minamoto no Yoriie, Yoritomo's eldest son and heir. By doing so, it relativizes the political position of the Minamoto, identifying them as one more ruling family fallen to ruin.

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