

“ALL IS VANITY AND EVANESCENCE”: MANIFESTATIONS OF PURE LAND
BUDDHISM WITHIN *THE TALE OF THE HEIKE*

by

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Introduction

A young boy, having just recently passed the age of eight, is wrapped in the arms of a woman in the cabin of a rocking vessel. The din of battle vaguely sounds outside, punctuated by the haphazard clashing of blades, the whizzing of arrows, and the occasional bitter wail of a man being vanquished. The child, with his radiant appearance shining and a contemplative expression, looks up into the conflicted face of his protector and asks “Where are you going to take me, grandmother?”¹ The widow, with tears threatening to fall from her eyes to grace her already disheveled features, resolves herself and turns to look upon her grandson, Emperor Antoku, a descendent of their now ailing clan, who was destined to rule gloriously for having adhered to the Buddha’s Ten Precepts in a past life. She reminds him of such, but tells him that an “evil karma” now befalls them and that their time in this world is nearing its end. The widow, steeling herself, takes him from the cabin along with the imperial family’s sacred regalia, arriving on the deck of their boat in time to see their opposition descending upon the few remaining vessels of their meager fleet. She instructs Emperor Antoku to look east and say his goodbyes to the Sun Goddess and then to finally turn his gaze to the west and chant “Hail Amida Buddha” so that he may be welcomed into the Pure Land Paradise far beyond the churning waves. Having done so, with tears staining his youthful face and his adjoined palms, she once again grasps him in her arms and tells him a new capital, one beneath the waves, awaits them. And thus, they plunge into the water; the gentle hair and visage of a boy sinking beneath the roiling sea never to surface again.²

¹ Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida, trans., *The Tale of the Heike: Heike Monogatari* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1975), 676.

² *Ibid*, 676-677.

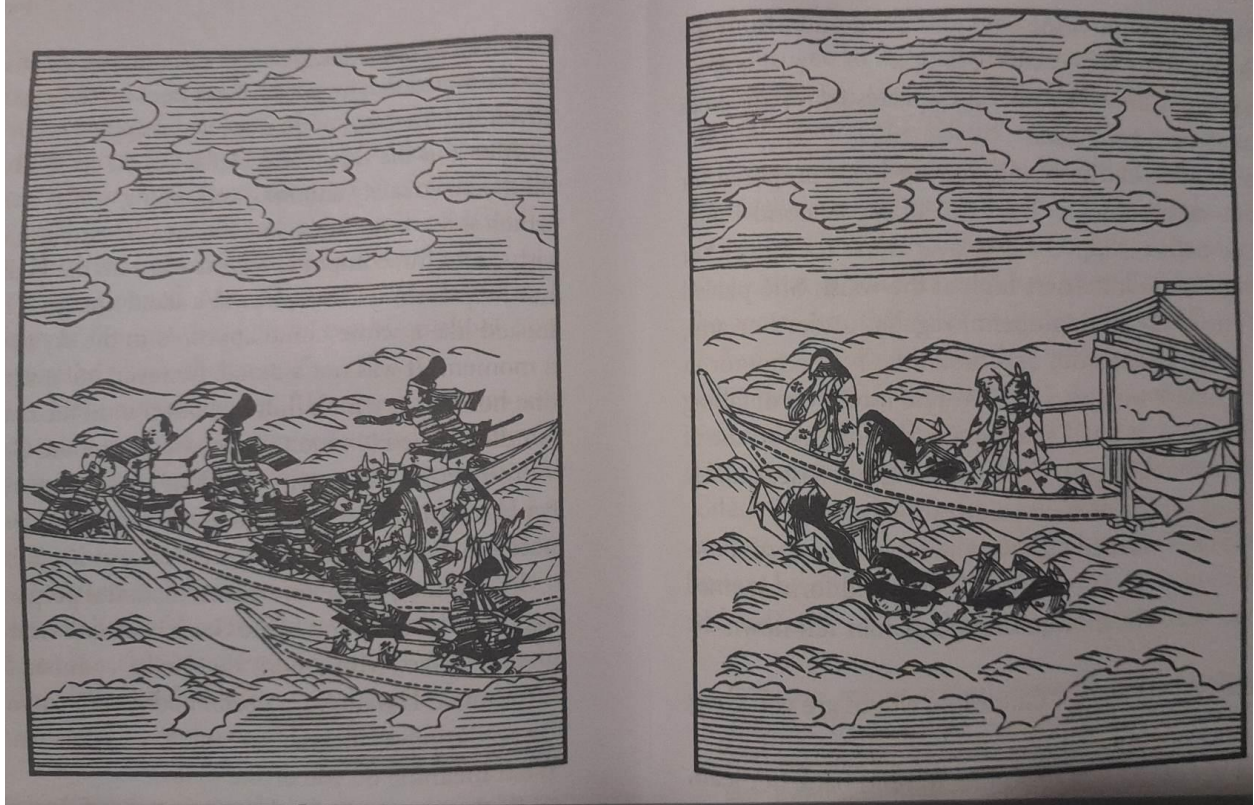


Figure 1: *The Nun of the Second Rank* (right), holding the child emperor (*Antoku*) in her arms, prepares to drown in the sea. *Genji soldiers* (left) board the boats carrying *Heike women*.

Source: Haruo Shirane, *The Tales of the Heike* (translated by Burton Watson), p. 140-141.

This tragic story is but one of many in the Japanese epic known as *The Tale of the Heike*, or *Heike monogatari*. Over seven-and-half-hundred pages long in its English translation, the tale recounts the events prior to, during, and after the conflict known as the Genpei (Gempei) War (1180-1185) fought between two rival clans.³ The *Heike monogatari* is somewhat unique as a piece of literature as there is no original definitive author attributed to the creation of the tale – similar to the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* which the Greek author Homer is credited as having written and who, as an individual, is little-known. The epic passed through numerous revisions in the generations following the Genpei War before arriving at its most popular form as a piece of

³ *Heike monogatari* is the Japanese name of the tale and the word *monogatari* is used to describe narrative-driven epics of Japanese prose from the medieval period.

recited literature by the end of the fourteenth century, conveyed by *biwa hōshi* – blind lute priests – who played an active part in the development of the story.⁴ *Biwa hōshi* were common in the Kamakura (1185 – 1333) and Muromachi (1336-1573) eras, either attached to temples around Kyoto or traveling across the country, relaying various Buddhist stories to all strata of medieval society.⁵ Their most notable feature aside from their blindness (which they were either born with or acquired over the course of their life) and status as priests were the *biwa* they carried with them, a lute-like instrument they would play that would accompany their lyrical recitation of stories. One *biwa hōshi* known as Kakuichi (1299-1371) created the most recognized and currently accepted standard version of the *Heike monogatari* in Kyoto around 1371, nearly four decades into the Muromachi era.⁶

The importance of Kakuichi’s involvement stems from his integral role in infusing the text with its prominent and now famous Buddhist elements from the Pure Land Buddhism school in conjunction with exhilarating and descriptive conflicts that would capture the attention of

⁴ Kenneth Dean Butler, “The Textual Evolution of The Heike Monogatari,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 26 (1966), 6, 29-30. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the *Heike monogatari* started its life as a read text before arriving at its form as a recitative text. The difference between the two being that read texts were used solely for reading and recited variants were made with the intent of being “fixed texts for memorization and recitation.” Recited texts for the *Heike monogatari* ended up becoming the dominant revised form.

⁵ Barbara Ruch, “The Other Side of Culture in Medieval Japan,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan: Volume 3: Medieval Japan*, ed. Kozo Yamamura, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 536. Not accounting for individual schools and practices of *biwa hōshi* guilds, the main two initial divisions of *biwa hōshi* were either situated in larger population centers in and around Kyoto under the employ of temples and similar religious institutions or traveled across eastern Japan, particularly Kyushu, reciting their tales for audiences both rich and poor.

Traditional eras in premodern Japanese history are divided in accordance with certain events or conflicts that redefined the country going forward, typically where the seat of governmental authority would reside for a substantial period of time (i.e. the capital or location of government). The periods themselves are thus named according to where that authority resided (i.e. the Kamakura period being named after the city where the first military government ruled for nearly a century-and-a-half).

⁶ Butler, “The Textual Evolution...”, 7-9, 36; Ruch, “The Other Side...”, 531-532, 535-539. Kakuichi spent nearly three decades, starting around 1340, working on revising the text before having fully dictated and passed it onto his disciple known as Teiichi three months before his death.

According to Ruch and numerous Japanese cultural historians, in the Kamakura and Muromachi eras people did not distinguish between whether *biwa hōshi* were born blind or became blind over the course of their life. Kakuichi himself lost his sight later in his lifetime and, having already spent his life studying at the Shoshazan monastery, trained to become a *biwa hōshi* to make a living. He eventually became the most notable *biwa hōshi* of his time, acquiring the title of *kengyō*, becoming master of the primary guild of the blind priests.

audiences, and, as a result, inform and contribute to the spread of Pure Land beliefs. Barbara Ruch, a historian of medieval Japanese culture, lauds Kakuichi and his variant of the text in relation to its effects in Japanese culture – and by extension religious impact – surmising, “It has not been sufficiently appreciated that no single work of Japanese literature or music has had a greater impact on subsequent literary genres, theater, and music – indeed on the Japanese people's very sense of their own past history – than has Akashi no Kakuichi's *Heike monogatari*.”⁷ Ruch, here and in her work “The Other Side of Culture in Medieval Japan,” establishes the importance of the *Kakuichi* story in Japanese historical consciousness for its ability to capture the minds of audiences while retelling an integral part of their past.⁸ In doing so, she sets a precedent for examining the *Heike monogatari*'s function and presence in medieval society, for “[t]he downfall of the Heike was everyone's history.”⁹

Although Kakuichi was instrumental in the popularization of the *Heike monogatari* and was the person who blended Pure Land elements seamlessly into a public work, he was not solely responsible for the original inclusion of Pure Land Buddhism. The first iteration of the story, made over a century before Kakuichi's, included Pure Land teachings and some of the first proper adherents of Pure Land used it for their religious lectures. This thesis will elaborate upon the construction of this first edited form of the *Heike monogatari* and other subsequent variants in relation to how they embody Pure Land and religious elements and how in turn they impacted the tale's overall evolution leading to Kakuichi's magnum opus. It is pertinent, however, that I conduct a discussion of Pure Land Itself before proceeding further.

⁷ Ruch, “The Other Side...”, 531–32.

⁸ The italicization of Kakuichi's name here indicates the specific variant of the *Heike monogatari* that is named after him. Other variants such as the *Kamakura* and *Hiramatsuke* (seen later) are also just the names attributed to specific versions of the *Heike monogatari* to assist in distinguishing them from one another.

⁹ Ruch, “The Other Side...”, 532.

The intrinsic Buddhist ideals imbued throughout the *Heike monogatari*'s narration, as seen in the initial introductory narrative, stem primarily from the rhetoric of the Pure Land (Jōdo) school. Pure Land found its rise in the Kamakura period around the era when the *Heike monogatari* was first composed, between 1218-1221.¹⁰ In other words the *Heike monogatari*'s development as a recited text coincided with the development of Pure Land as a religious discourse. Although the *Heike monogatari* embodies numerous Buddhist elements, such as a belief of impermanence, Jōdo discourse is the dominant ideology present throughout the text, with its foundational beliefs shaping and informing the content and recitation of the tale.

Pure Land, as a whole, reduced to its simplest components, is effectively a branch of Buddhism whose practitioners place their faith in Amida Buddha. Amida, upon achieving enlightenment, created a Western Paradise, a literal Pure Land, where all people could be reborn in order to attain enlightenment themselves outside the Buddhist cycle of death and rebirth that forms the foundations of Buddhist ideology and karmic accrument. Known as the six paths, the cycle of death and rebirth is divided into six separate realms of reincarnation with the hells being the worst and the realm of heavenly beings being the greatest. Amida's Pure Land lies above the six paths as its own "seventh metaphysical level."¹¹ One of the most appealing aspects of Pure Land, as a faith, is that it did not discriminate against one's moral character, sex, class, or any other social indicator. All could gain entry into the Pure Land as long as they were sincere in the practice of their faith to Amida Buddha, and live in eternal bliss as they attained Buddhahood.

¹⁰ Butler, "The Textual Evolution...", 17–25, 29–30, 34; Ruch, "The Other Side...", 533. The origins of the *Heike monogatari* and its evolution is a complicated discussion that has been debated among scholars, but its authorship has been generally attributed to a Lay Priest known as Yukinaga. While it is not entirely clear if Yukinaga was the original author of the war tale, evidence suggests that his *Shibu* text composed between 1218-1221 was its first iteration, although it has been lost to history. For a more detailed analysis and breakdown that exists outside the scope of this thesis, I direct you to Butler's work covering the *Heike monogatari*'s textual evolution.

¹¹ William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 51.

Pure Land Buddhism, however, espouses that life is impermanent and that tormenting pain and ruin are inevitable in any of the six paths regardless of where one is reborn, correlating the cycle of death and rebirth with cyclical suffering. The faith pushes people to “escape” the six paths altogether through the practice of *nenbutsu*, the literal recitation of Amida Buddha’s name as a saving prayer to bring people into his Western Paradise. These unsettling implications made about the six paths are particularly exacerbated by Buddhist views of the era prior to Pure Land’s rise that believed society had entered an era of spiritual decline known as *mappō* or “the Age of the Latter Law.” This period, which is thought to have begun in 1052, was “an age in which the spiritual capacities of the people [had] declined to the point where they [were] no longer capable of attaining buddhahood through traditional Buddhist methods of self-cultivation,” essentially implying that all of society was damned to reincarnate within the six paths after that date.¹² When traditional Buddhist institutions, which were very “mechanical and ritualistic” in their practices and separated from the sphere of common people, were faced with many new prospective Buddhist practitioners among the masses seeking consolation following the Genpei War, they failed to address concerns regarding *mappō*.¹³ This failure, in conjunction with the intimate fear of being potentially doomed to suffer within the six paths, drew people to the simple piety of Pure Land and the salvation it promised in Amida Buddha’s Western Paradise.

Pure Land ideas of impermanence, the six paths, *nenbutsu* practice as a solution to *mappō*, and more feature as integral themes within the *Heike monogatari*. It quickly becomes evident how Pure Land rhetoric influences the narrative and construction of the story when observing it with a religiously-focused lens. This connection between Pure Land and the tale also

¹² Robert F. Rhodes and Richard K. Payne, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū and the Construction of Pure Land Discourse in Heian Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017), 287.

¹³ Mikiso Hane and Louis G. Perez, *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey*, Second edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015), 103.

reveals the epic's practical use in disseminating the religious discourse's soteriology. The *Heike monogatari*'s popularity as a piece of nationally recited literature, as Ruch described it, in tandem with its expert utilization of religion as a fundamental narrative device, would see it function as a tool to spread Pure Land discourse.

By exploring the historical and narrative background of the *Heike monogatari*, this thesis illuminates the connection between the story and its religious influence, from the events that caused the Genpei War and its resulting aftermath to the tale's origins and place as a work of popular literature under the stewardship and guidance of the *biwa hōshi* priests who heralded the story throughout medieval Japan. Following this, my thesis will examine a few fundamental ideas of Pure Land in conjunction with an examination of some of the *Heike monogatari*'s tales. Looking at specific stories from the epic in relation to common Pure Land themes will establish how the religion's rhetorical presence as a narrative device in the *Heike monogatari* leads the tale to propagate religious ideology in the process of its recitation across Japan.

Historical Background: Genpei War, Taira and Minamoto, and Civil and Religious Strife

The Genpei War, Its Actors, and Its Consequences in Historical Memory

Historically, the Genpei War lasted from 1180-1185 during the Heian era (794–1185) and took place as a result of fighting between two warring clans, the presiding Taira clan in Kyoto and the challenging Minamoto clan of Eastern Japan— i.e. the Heike and Genji respectively. These two clans and their leading members are the primary actors of the *Heike monogatari*. The Heike clan receives particular focus, however, as the story is mainly concerned with depicting the events surrounding their terrible fate.

Prior to the war, the Heike had found themselves situated comfortably among the imperial aristocracy, having even succeeded in installing one of their own, Antoku (1178-1185),

as the reigning emperor, albeit with him still being an adolescent. Their ascendancy, however, led them to make many enemies and Prince Mochihito (1151-1180) (brother of the recently retired emperor), at the persuasion of the priest Minamoto no Yorimasa (1106-1180), called upon the Genji to destroy the Heike for their transgressions against the imperial house so that he himself could take up the throne.¹⁴ Both the Heike and Genji had a bitter history of earlier conflict as each held substantial power in outlying regions and vied for the patronage of the central government. The remaining Genji that Mochihito entreated had been in exile for nearly two decades in the eastern provinces, having both failed to defeat the Heike after they came to the aid of the reigning emperor in the Hōgen Insurrection (1156-1158) and to usurp their clan head Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181) – a central character in the *Heike monogatari* – in the Heiji Insurrection (1159).¹⁵ These Genji included the sons of the executed Genji leader of the Heiji conflict, Yoritomo (1147-1199) and Yoshitsune (1159-1189), who Kiyomori had spared the same fate as their father only because of the mercy and behest of his step-mother and on the condition that Yoshitsune's concubine mother became Kiyomori's mistress.¹⁶ Minamoto no Yoritomo and his half-brother Yoshitsune were the ones to heed the initial call of Prince Mochihito and rally

¹⁴ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike: ...*, 234-237; Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan: ...*, 58–61. The political structure of Heian era Japan saw power concentrated and contested between two major parties. An emperor would abdicate the throne and retire, becoming known as a “cloistered emperor” for his religious association to Buddhist cloisters, and instead wield power through military reagents. This practice arose in opposition to the dominance of the Fujiwara clan in the central government who would exercise their own political strength through the reigning emperor as advisors during the Heian era. Eventually, the military families under the cloistered emperor would go on to weave their ways into the power structure of the aristocracy, ousting the Fujiwara, yet in doing so they only further deepened existing power struggles of the era. The practice is present in the *Heike monogatari*, where the reigning Emperor Takakura is forced to abdicate the throne to his child son Antoku by the Heike clan. Antoku was born to Takakura's wife Kenreimon-In, daughter to the leader of the Heike clan, Taira no Kiyomori.

¹⁵ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan: ...*, 80-81

The Hōgen Insurrection was a conflict facilitated by a struggle between the reigning emperor and retired emperor. The Heike, led by Kiyomori, came to the aid of the reigning emperor to defeat the opposing faction which was supported by some Genji clansmen, most notably Minamoto no Tameyoshi (grandfather of Yoritomo).

The Heiji Insurrection was an attempted coup staged by Tameyoshi's son, Minamoto no Yoshitomo (father of Yoritomo), who, after having been ordered by the emperor to execute his father in the Hōgen Insurrection, rose in the court ranks alongside Kiyomori. He became jealous of Kiyomori's position and status and worked with other dissidents in an attempt to overthrow him, but failed, leading to his own execution.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the country against the Heike. In a spectacular clash across central Japan, the Heike were eventually driven from power by the Genji under the guidance of the two and were defeated completely at the climactic Battle of Dan-no-ura (1185).

The conclusion to this conflict marked the start of the Kamakura period, known as such for the institution and rise of the military government known as the *bakufu* (or shogunate) – literally “tent government” – under Yoritomo, located in the small city of Kamakura. The Genji’s victory was not without its consequences however, with the Genpei War having upset and shaken the foundations of society to a level previously unknown to the people of Japan, causing widespread civil strife. The discord of such national devastation was hard for many existing esoteric Buddhist institutions of Japan to reconcile as they found themselves in a period of literal and spiritual decline after having entered the aforementioned era of *mappō* which prevented salvation outside the six paths according to their traditional rhetoric. As a result, the war set the stage for the entry of new Buddhist beliefs into the country to accommodate concerns over the conflict. Having also been previously restricted to the upper echelons of Japanese society, existing and budding Buddhist institutions found new practitioners among the common people who sought consolation and spiritual satisfaction following the war, leading the Kamakura period to become an era of “religious ferment.”¹⁷

Pure Land Schools and Founders – Fundamental Contributors to the *Heike monogatari*’s Content

Hōnen’s (1133-1212) Pure Land school (Jōdo Buddhism), based in the Pure Land framework established by the monk Genshin (942-1017) during the Heian era, arose as the most notable religious organization of the Kamakura era, later followed by his more secularized disciple Shinran’s (1171-1262) True Pure Land school (Shin Buddhism).¹⁸ Both schools were

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 102-103

¹⁸ It must be noted, however, that while these very important Pure Land founding figures are responsible for the systemization of Amida’s religious soteriology, their breaks from existing Buddhist institutions are not so clear cut.

widely appealing for the simplicity of their espoused practices that were easy to perform, even for those who were less virtuous, intelligent, literate, and steel-minded as traditional monks. Alongside this, each school, through devotion to Amida Buddha, offered new means to attain salvation in spite of the spiritual shift caused by *mappō* that prevented people from achieving enlightenment and rebirth outside the six paths, which further accelerated their popularity. Since the Pure Land ideologies of Genshin and Hōnen's works are the most prevalent and influential in the *Heike monogatari*'s construction, with Hōnen's interpretations of Pure Land directly drawing upon Genshin's own ideas over two centuries prior, it is necessary to elaborate upon their contributions and practice of Pure Land in the analysis of the war tale's content.

People had been left "widowed, orphaned, or disabled" as the Genpei War "tore apart families on all levels of society."¹⁹ The conflict had also caused the collapse of the agricultural and economic systems, with famine and even natural disasters accompanying them. All of this, in conjunction with shifting political, military, and religious institutions, would lead people, particularly the masses, to flock to new Buddhist schools such as Jōdo as a way to make sense of the rapidly changing world in which they found themselves. Having now established the context of the war and the precedents it set that led to the rise of Pure Land Buddhist schools, exploration of *The Tale of the Heike*'s narrative background can now begin.

Narrative Background: Construction, Origin, and Authors of the *Heike Monogatari*

Construction and Origins of the *Heike monogatari* as a Recited Text

While the *Heike monogatari* discusses events from the late Heian era, it does not fully reflect beliefs of that time period, instead drawing upon religious rhetoric developed during the

Once again, this lies outside the scope of this thesis, so I direct you to *Religion in Japanese History* by Joseph M. Kitagawa for further reading.

¹⁹ Ruch, "The Other Side...", 532. Cited as part of a larger narrative in which Ruch discusses the origins of the *Heike monogatari* and explains its place in the history and culture of Japan.

Kamakura and early Muromachi eras. It is in the Kamakura period, around the second decade of the thirteenth century, that the story was first written and then progressively refined over numerous generations. Since the war tale is, at a fundamental level, a romanticized piece of literature designed for oral recitation, it did not attempt to accurately recount the religious specifics of the period in which it is based, instead drawing upon and incorporating growing popular religious discourse of the time period in which it was composed. While Pure Land discourse and its basic fundamentals entered Japan in the Heian era under Genshin, Pure Land Buddhism did not take root in any capacity until after the Genpei War and not in the same form first set forth, as Hōnen and Shinran revised and simplified it to better fit among the general populace.²⁰ The *Heike monogatari* similarly underwent numerous revisions in the process of its construction before reaching popularity, as discussed in the introductory examination of Kakuichi and *biwa hōshi*, implementing Pure Land ideas early in its first revision.

Scholar Kenneth Butler asserts that, following the inception of the initial *Heike monogatari*, the first variant of the story appeared in Kyoto in the form of the *Hiramatsuke* text some time before 1240. It is in this text that the tale acquires its Jōdo Pure Land components. During this time period, however, the practice of Pure Land was officially forbidden in the capital until at least 1240 and was still looked down upon for many decades afterwards as Hōnen's school was seen as dangerous by other coexisting Buddhist schools since his advocated that only Pure Land *nenbutsu* practice was necessary for salvation.²¹ There was one particular group of early disciples of the Jōdo Pure Land school that existed in Kyoto during the ban, and it is to them that *Hiramatsuke* is attributed. Butler contends that this variant of the text found use

²⁰ Rhodes and Payne, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū...*, 1–3. In his introduction to Genshin's *Ōjōyōshū*, Rhodes distinguishes between the different rhetorics of Pure Land Buddhism, particularly the difference between how Genshin and Hōnen believed *nenbutsu* should be practiced.

²¹ Butler, "The Textual Evolution...", 34-35.

primarily “as a *tanebon* or ‘prompt book’” for lectures to propagate Jōdo Pure Land rhetoric, having inserted “passages illustrative of Jōdo teachings.”²² However, with their specific school of Buddhism still officially proscribed at the time of the *Hiramatsuke*’s construction, it is unlikely that the text was ever used for performance in front of an audience, having been simply circulated as a reading text among the groups most “ardent disciples” and kept a secret from the general public.²³

The *Hiramatsuke* version of the *Heike monogatari* would eventually find its way to Shoshazan, a popular monastic enclave of Buddhist temples west of Kyoto in Harima province (modernly part of Hyōgo Prefecture). Shoshazan, with its vast library of “historic and religious accounts”, was notable for having become a gathering place for “battle singers” following the Genpei War where “interest in the composition of vocal narratives flourished”.²⁴ It is also where Kakuichi was originally a monk and later a reciter of the epic as a *biwa hōshi* after having lost his sight. Here, under the work of a group of tale reciters, the *Hiramatsuke* text would gain its descriptive battle scenes of the Genpei War while maintaining its Pure Land elements, developing into the so-called *Kamakura* text around 1300. Other, less religious variants developed laterally in Kyoto as the city progressed through the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and became a center for the recitation of the *Heike monogatari*.²⁵ When Kakuichi left Shoshazan for Kyoto, he brought the memorized *Kamakura* variant with him and, with the assistance of another *biwa hōshi* in the city, combined it with a Kyoto-born variant made around 1300-1340 to produce the current *Heike monogatari*.²⁶

²² *Ibid*, 35.

²³ *Ibid*, 35-36.

²⁴ Ruch, “The Other Side...”. 536.

²⁵ Butler, “The Textual Evolution...”, 8-9, 34, 37-38. The battle scenes from the Genpei War added to the *Kamakura* text are believed to have come from oral battle tales that the reciters had learned and practiced for recitation.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 37. This Kyoto variant was the *Chikuhakuen* text and the *biwa hōshi* who helped Kakuichi, named Joichi, was responsible for having produced it alongside other reciters from another earlier *Heike monogatari* revision which had persisted in Kyoto called the *Yashiro* text.

Butler's historiography thus establishes the war tale's past of religious association and makes a vital connection to the *Heike monogatari*'s potential as a tool to propagate the religious ideology of Pure Land Buddhism. His arguments help to solidify the foundations and goals of the thesis in proving the utilization of Pure Land in the *Heike monogatari* went beyond just narrative convenience, having been used to more easily convey Pure Land rhetoric. The *Hiramatsuke* text was originally designed to contain Jodō Pure Land elements as it was to be used in lectures and sermons related to the religious school, and the continued existence of the *Hiramatsuke*'s religious elements in the *Kamakura* and *Kakuichi* variants serve not only as devices to further the narration, but also to communicate and promote Pure Land ideas and practices to audiences. *Kakuichi*'s *Heike monogatari* is thus a vehicle of religious proselytization. By observing the integral role that general *biwa hōshi* played in popularizing the *Heike monogatari* as they recited it across Japan, this argument will become clearer.

Biwa Hōshi as Pure Land Propagators and Reciters of the Heike monogatari

Biwa hōshi, as illustrated in Figure 1 and mentioned previously, were the primary individuals responsible for the retelling and recitation of the *Heike monogatari*. Butler likens them to “Panathenaean rhapsodes of classical Greece.”²⁷ Those who became *biwa hōshi* did so because their blindness limited their opportunities in life. Joining the priesthood, *biwa hōshi* worked with other Buddhist priest colleagues who still retained their sight to relay and construct written texts and work to memorize tales for recitation.²⁸ Initially, similar to their sighted priest counterparts giving sermons, a *biwa hōshi*'s purpose of performing was to assist in disseminating Buddhism through their storytelling.²⁹ The majority of the stories relayed by *biwa hōshi* to the

²⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁸ Barbara Ruch, “Medieval Jongleurs and the Making of a National Literature,” in *Japan in the Muromachi Age*, ed. John Whitney Hall and Toyoda Takeshi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 287.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 306. There was a certain superstitious element associated with and believed by *biwa hōshi* that accounted for their involvement with Buddhist institutions and religious dissemination aside from the economic necessity resulting from their blindness determining their occupation. It was maintained that their blindness was a result of sins

common masses were directly related to and inspired by the events of the Genpei War with the *Heike monogatari* the most popular among them.³⁰ They would make the teaching of Buddhism an entertaining experience through their musical recitals, helping to elevate the war tale beyond the initial space of religious institutions.

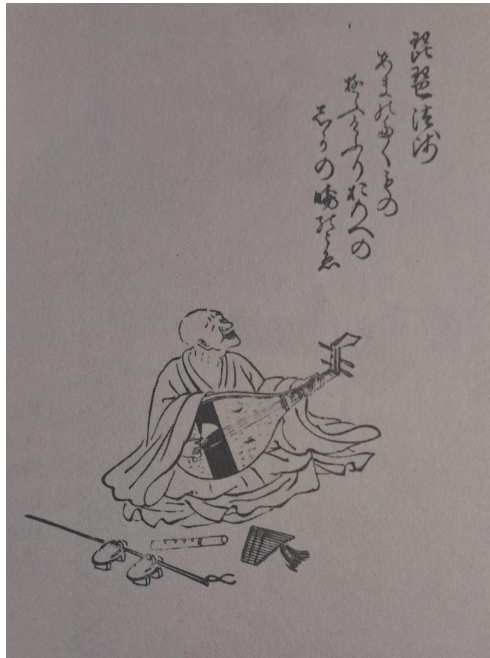


Figure 2: “A biwa hōshi performing the *Heike monogatari*. From a late eighteenth-century copy of a sixteenth-century scroll. *Shichijūichiban shokunin uta awase*, reproduced in *Zoku gunsho ruijū*.”

Source: Ruch, “Medieval Jongleurs...”, 296.

The efforts of *biwa hōshi* alongside other medieval jongleurs in practicing their crafts and communicating literature, history, and religion artistically would ultimately cause orally recited literature, like the *Heike monogatari*, to equal or outright surpass the popularity of literary texts

committed in a prior life, and that it would be restored to them either in this life or the next “by the religious power of their activities.” As a result, many likely found themselves ardently spreading Buddhist teachings in the hopes of (re)gaining their eyesight through the accumulation of karmic merit in this life, with the potential of attaining salvation being a powerful motivator as well.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 288, 307-308.

themselves, becoming a far more approachable and engaging format for commoners.³¹ Consequently, a great many people learned about Buddhism, and Pure Land ideas, through *biwa hōshi* recitation instead of from doctrinal Buddhist sources, further emphasizing the importance of the *Heike monogatari* in the common religious space. For the devastated population that lived through the Genpei War to see the rise of the Kamakura *bakufu* and growing samurai military class in the Age of the Latter Law, *biwa hōshi* provided a dynamic auditory method by which all people, even those who were illiterate or similarly blind, could engage with Buddhist beliefs to make sense of the shifting sociopolitical and religious structures of Japan. With continually growing popularity in this time of reflective turmoil and existential spiritual decline, *biwa hōshi* alongside other jongleurs sought to offer “the powers of Buddhism (...) as the answer to history’s woes” through the reframing of important historical events with an eye towards growing Pure Land rhetoric.³² They had, as Ruch supports, effectively created a movement of Buddhist literary recitation that shifted and expanded the ways in which the people of Japan engaged with their history and religious beliefs.

The depictions of the Heike’s downfall and the events of the Genpei War within the *Heike monogatari* also gained new relevance within the context of the Genkō War (1331-1333) and its aftermath, which marked the transition from the Kamakura period into the Muromachi. The conflict would see the collapse of the Kamakura *bakufu*, mirroring the fate of Heike-dominated aristocracy in the Heian era. Imperial power was split between two rival courts, with the northern one controlled by the Muromachi *bakufu* in 1336, and the clash between them in the persisting decades before the 15th century would lead many to make comparisons to the Genpei War a

³¹*Ibid*, 288.

Jongleur is a French term often used to describe traveling entertainers in medieval eras that were well-versed in any variety of arts; music and recitation chief among them.

³² Ruch, “The Other Side...”, 536.

century-and-a-half prior.³³ As a result of these factors, when the *Kakuichi* text began circulation among *biwa hōshi* less than four decades later, it found widespread acclaim for its ability to encapsulate and address concerns of imperial conflict and political/moral instability in Japan through the lens of Pure Land Buddhism. And since recurring civil conflict was a constant fixture of medieval Japan, the expertly crafted themes and depictions of the Genpei War in Kakuichi's *Heike monogatari* would remain prevalent in the following centuries as well, with Ruch claiming that it became the war against “which all subsequent wars were compared.”³⁴ This ensured that the epic and its religious concepts would live on in Japanese culture long after its initial debut, helping to further propagate and cement Pure Land soteriology in the country.

However, there was a notable shift in the recitation of the *Heike monogatari* as time went on as a result of declining financial stability within many temples and shrines during the Kamakura and Muromachi eras. *Biwa hōshi* and other jongleurs would often be the first cut from their respective religious institutions when economic troubles arose, leading them to become more financially dependent upon their work as a means to support themselves.³⁵ While this shift slowly occurred over the next few centuries and would see *biwa hōshi* become more economically driven than religiously motivated, as guilds and schools began to form around honing their work, it would not be correct to say they were entirely deprived of their religious association or secularized as Ruch would claim.³⁶ Even if the faith of some may have declined in the practice of recitation, calling it a process of secularization does very little in actually recognizing the reality of these former priests who still played an integral role in the *Heike monogatari*'s dissemination. The religious depictions and lessons of *biwa hōshi* were still

³³ *Ibid*, 532.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 533.

³⁵ Ruch, “Medieval Jongleurs...”, 305.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 305.

relevant and held sway in the public space, continually assisting in the process of circulating Buddhist ideology to many receptive audiences who still viewed them with religious reverence.

Much of their recited texts still resided in the sphere of Buddhist and religious works that had cemented themselves in medieval Japanese society over the previous centuries. Their stories and the unique ways in which they conveyed them, recitatively and religiously, remained popular amongst the population for their self-reflective Buddhist concepts and characters that demonstrated values that promised salvation for those living through the tumultuous and conflict-ridden history of medieval Japan. Despite their shift toward more commercial attitudes, *biwa hōshi* were still fundamental to the spread and propagation of Pure Land Buddhism, with the *Heike monogatari* remaining as the most dominant and favored text in their collections of recited literature, espousing ideas of impermanence and the saving grace of Amida Buddha and his Pure Land Paradise to the west.

The Tale of the Heike: Pure Land Buddhism and Impermanence in the Heike monogatari's Narrative

The Six Paths and the Hells within the *Heike Monogatari*

There are six divisions within the cycle of death and rebirth as briefly mentioned in the introduction. The concept of the six paths in Japanese Buddhism was adopted from Chinese and Korean Buddhism, and is integral to understanding Pure Land and Japanese Buddhism as a whole.³⁷ In descending order of the level of suffering an individual would endure in each path, there are the hells, the realm of hungry spirits, the realm of beasts, the realm of furious demons (*ashura*), the realm of human beings, and the realm of heavenly beings.³⁸ The monk Genshin, in his magnum opus the *Ōjōyōshū* (985), “The Essentials of Salvation,” which sets the frameworks

³⁷ LaFleur, *The Karma of Words*:..., 28-29.

³⁸ Genshin, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū: Collected Essays on Birth Into the Pure Land*, trans. A. K. Reischauer, vol. 7, *The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 2, 1930, 19–20.

for Pure Land practice, makes clear that all paths, in one way or another, lead to inevitable suffering and pain. He says that life in the paths is “like living in a house which is on fire,” with human existence being no different.³⁹ Genshin proceeds to explain the tragic impermanence of human life, the consequences of age, and the many ills – both literally and figuratively – which befall people over the course of their life to substantiate his claims. In doing so, he creates a bitter and pitiful outlook of life that would likely resonate deeply with the common people.

Genshin, however, also describes the Western Paradise to contrast against his depictions of the six paths. The *Ōjōyōshū*'s third volume lists the innumerable pleasures of the Amida's Pure Land and its unending joy and grandeur. In describing the beauty of the Western Paradise, Genshin highlights the dichotomy between it and the six paths to further prompt people to engage with Pure Land belief so they may “leave the Unclean World” of the six paths and achieve everlasting bliss and salvation in Amida Buddha's Pure Land.⁴⁰ However, his descriptions of Amida's Paradise alongside the six paths, both of which lived on in the future rhetoric of Pure Land schools, served a twofold purpose. Joseph Kitagawa, a noted Japanese religious scholar, tells us that in the Heian era, even before Genshin established the basis of Pure Land framework for Japanese adoption, the appeal of paradise struggled against the fears the hells inspired.

It was the intention of [early Amidist priests] to offer the oppressed masses a glimpse of hope in the life to come by assuring them of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land. However, the masses, who had never experienced comfort and happiness in this world had no aptitude for imagining a land of bliss in the hereafter, just as the Heian aristocrats had no gift for feeling the misery and suffering of this life. Thus, many poor people began to fear suffering in hell rather than to anticipate the joy of rebirth in the Pure Land[.]⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 19, 89-131

⁴¹ Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, Lectures on the History of Religions 7 (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966), 81-82.

This tension features prominently within the *Heike monogatari*, playing upon the existential fear that came from being in the Age of the Latter Law.

The *Heike monogatari* utilizes these Pure Land themes of impermanence and suffering to great effect to later contrast against salvatory rhetoric. This becomes most apparent when observing figurative depictions of the hells in the epic. There are eight divisions within the hells, with each section housing numerous subsections which damned people would find themselves in for a variety of moral crimes. The *Ōjōyōshū* describes the hells in vivid and horrific detail and the kinds of fates condemned individuals would experience across innumerable *kalpas* (a varying unit of Buddhist time measured in billions of years) should they arrive in any of the hells.⁴² The *Heike monogatari* draws upon these descriptions and, while it is not explicitly stated or the connection made, the epic's primary antagonist suffers some of the torment people experience in the hells as they yet live as an omen of what awaits them following death.

Taira no Kiyomori, head of the Heike clan, reaches his end in a dreadful fashion in the seventh chapter of the *Heike monogatari*'s sixth book, becoming an embodiment of people's deepest fears regarding the hells. Having become known as the Priest-Premier for his vaunted position within the imperial government and position within the Buddhist priesthood, Kiyomori is the primary antagonist of the story, held to be responsible for all the ills which befall him and his clan. His unceasing avarice and tenacity in climbing the ranks of the government alongside instituting his own family in positions of power, even going so far as to force young Antoku of Heike blood upon the throne in place of his father, leads him to acquire a great deal of negative Buddhist karma. This karmic debt became so great as to spread to the entirety of the Heike clan, which in turn led to their unceremonious downfall. It is an irony, for Kioymori's desire to

⁴² Genshin, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*:..., 20-50. Genshin's descriptions of the hells and potential fates are truly disturbing at times. One should be aware in the case they wish to further explore this content.

solidify and consolidate his clan's future (permanence) is the catalyst for their undoing and subsequent annihilation (impermanence). As a result of all the sins he committed in life to maintain and cement Heike hegemony, Kiyomori accumulated so much evil karma that he instead cemented his own destiny to languish within the hells. Genshin establishes within his *Ōjōyōshū* the kinds of sins one must have committed to enter a specific layer of hell, but it becomes difficult to place precisely where Kiyomori finds himself following the amount of crimes he committed in his quest for Heike dominance. One common thread, regardless of which hell he will likely find himself in, however, is the excruciating heat which dominates every layer of the perpetually aflame landscape.⁴³ Preceded by a devastatingly unnatural fever, Kiyomori's death is a reflection of the heats of the hells coming up to claim him in his last moments:

Kiyomori takes to his bed, an excruciating heat roiling off his aged skin to sear all who come near as an unseen fire rages within his wretched soul. Water fails to soothe his fever, for he is unable to consume it and the bath, which he has filled with spring water from the holy Mount Hiei, boils and quickly evaporates upon his entering. Even water run through a rain pipe attached to a nearby well in an attempt to cool him recoils from his very being, as if possessed by a life of its own and that which reaches him turns to a conflagrating inferno that fills his palace with black smoke. His wife, the grandmother of Emperor Antoku, is wracked by savage nightmares where she is visited by couriers of the king of hell Emma. They say to her "We have come for the Priest-Premier. (...) For his crime Emma's tribunal has decided to condemn him to hell-without-end. Emma wrote 'without.' He will write 'end' when the Priest-Premier arrives."⁴⁴

While awake she can only watch helplessly as Kiyomori's condition deteriorates. With tears

⁴³ *Ibid*, 35. A perpetual theme within Genshin's description of all the different hells is the burning heat and flames which accompany every layer, being so intense that, in the case of the Hell of Scorching Heat, "If one should put a portion of this fire as small as the light of a firefly in this world of ours it would consume this world in a short moment."

⁴⁴ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*: ..., 368.

flowing freely and staining her cheeks, she resolves herself and pushes past the ferocious heat to ask her ailing husband what his last wishes may be. In his torment, reflective of the hatred and wickedness still grasping his withering heart, he gasps out: “When I die, do not build a temple or pagoda. Do not perform any ceremonies for me. Instead you must send an army at once to vanquish Yoritomo; you must cut off his head and hang it before my tomb. I ask for nothing more.”⁴⁵ Not two days later, Taira no Kiyomori, of the glorious Heike clan, dies in convulsing anguish, still unable to quell the heat which eventually encompasses and devours his tortured soul, dragging it to a scorching abyss, never to rise again. All that remains aside from his soon-cremated corpse is the progeny of his clan, who now inherit the same chains of evil karma which had bound him, destined to be dragged into the same howling depths unseen. A widow weeps.⁴⁶



Figure 3: *The Fever of Taira no Kiyomori.*

Source: Suri Tsune, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 1883.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 369.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 367-370.

Hell wardens, as described by Genshin, greet people upon their fearful entrance into the hells. They, in their tormenting glee tell entrants that “the burning by fire here is not that of a literal fire but rather the hot passion of your evil Karma. The burning of fire may be extinguished, but the burning of evil Karma cannot be put out.”⁴⁷ Kiyomori, in the rendition above taken from the *Heike monogatari*, experiences only a taste of that which awaits him and the heat which ravaged his body he could never hope to extinguish with water as it was evil which gripped his very being, condemning him to eternal hellfire. This story vividly ties to ideas related to the six paths as presented by Genshin and, in turn, to many ideas related to rebirth in Pure Land soteriology, further establishing the religious presence within the tale.

There is another example of how the hells and Pure Land appear within the story in regards to Taira no Shigehira (1156-1185). Certainly more guiltless than his father Kiyomori, Shigehira is a character that becomes a victim of circumstance. Lieutenant General Shigehira, at the command of his father, moved to quell the uprising of monks at Nara in the closing chapter of book 5 of the *Heike monogatari*.⁴⁸ Due to an unfortunate communication during the ensuing battle which had led on into the night, one of the soldiers under Shigehira’s command set fire to a nearby building which in turn spreads to the temples and sacred grounds of Nara, bringing wanton destruction and death, even burning a large statue of Buddha “who dwells in the land where enlightened souls live.”⁴⁹ In his work, Genshin says that “[t]hose who have set fire to pagodas and temple buildings, burned images of Buddha, burned the homes of priests and burned

⁴⁷ Genshin, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*..., 39.

⁴⁸ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*: ..., 264-272, 340-341. The monks of Nara had risen up against Heike rule in response to Prince Mochito’s murder at the hands of Heike warriors after escaping the Battle of Uji (1180), a conflict at Uji bridge (over the similarly named river) between forces which supported the imperial Prince’s claim to the throne and Heike clansmen. Shigehira had been sent to Nara in retaliation for the monks’ murder of a previous contingent that had been sent unarmed on more peaceful terms.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 342-344. The short quote refers to the Pure Land in which Amida and others have transcended the six paths.

the bed-room furniture of priests, fall into (the hell whose) torments (...) are the most severe (off all the hells).”⁵⁰



Figure 4: Burning of the Temples at Nara.

Source: Ai Yukimura, *The Heike Story*, Original Net Animation, 2021.

All of these things transpired during the Siege of Nara (1180), and although Shigehira is not individually responsible for the acts committed on that day, he is the one held accountable for the outcome of the conflict. Following his capture at the hands of the Genji, they tell him time-and-time again that despite his pleasant and honorable nature, nothing can save him from the wrath of the remaining monks of Nara and that he is likely to suffer within the pits of the hells even if no suffering such as Kiyomori's own visibly manifests.⁵¹ Aside from those close to him such as his wife, only a lone priest known by the name of Hōnen believes he has the

⁵⁰ Genshin, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*:..., 45.

⁵¹ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*: ..., 583, 585, 588, 595, 604, 714.

opportunity to escape a fate within the hells by adhering to the precepts of the religious figure Amida Buddha.⁵²

This priest whom Shigehira meets is the very same Hōnen responsible for the foundation of the Jōdo Pure Land school, and during their meeting Hōnen explains the saving grace of Amida. Before being escorted to Kamakura to face Yoritomo, Shigehira requests a meeting with Hōnen to discuss the afterlife.⁵³ The chief guard heeds his request and Hōnen arrives to find Shigehira distraught. Shigehira remorsefully informs Hōnen of his sins, failure to adhere to Buddhist precepts, and a desire to correct his wrongdoings. “If I die in such a wretched state of mind, I will surely be reborn in hell, where await me the tortures of the pit of fire, the blood pond of beasts, and the swords of hungry spirits. And so I beseech you to be so kind as to extend your compassionate hand to help an evil man like me and show me the way to salvation.”⁵⁴ Moved by his passionate speech, Hōnen himself weeps, and tells Shigehira that such fortitude would allow him to achieve salvation in the Pure Land. Hōnen continues, telling Shigehira that although there are numerous Buddhist practices, the best one in their degenerate age (*mappō*) is the invocation of Amida Buddha’s name. He says that to enter any of the nine levels of the Pure Land, one only need to recite three words with absolute conviction “– ‘Hail Amida Buddha.’”⁵⁵ Regardless of ignorance, prior evil, or neglect of the Buddhist doctrine, Amida Buddha would liberate Shigehira and guarantee his rebirth in the Western Paradise so long as he has “cast (...) aside all other practices” and recite Amida’s name with repentant faith.⁵⁶ This act of chanting Amida

⁵² I cannot find a source which corroborates whether Shigehira had met Hōnen historically. This story, as far as I am aware, is confined to the fictionalized writings of the *Heike monogatari* with there being no recorded event of them having met in life, further supporting the assertion that Pure Land elements (and characters) have been inserted into tale’s construction for the purpose of disseminating Pure Land soteriology.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 594.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 595.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 595.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 596.

Buddha’s name, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, is *nenbutsu* and is the fundamental practice of Honen’s Jōdo Pure Land.

Nenbutsu Practice and Salvation within the Heike monogatari

Nenbutsu (nembutsu) as a practice was originally described by Genshin in the *Ōjōyōshū* before being simplified by Hōnen in his own seminal work the *Senchakushū* (1198), “Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow”. Genshin initially divided the practice into two forms: contemplative and recitative. He maintained, however, that contemplative *nenbutsu* – the act of visualizing Amida Buddha, the Pure Land, and the other bodhisattvas residing there – was the superior of the two and that its practice should align with other existing Buddhist beliefs and practices.⁵⁷ Despite this, Genshin does admit that recitative *nenbutsu* was the easier of the two to perform, and this is the version that Hōnen pursued as the ultimate practice of Jōdo doctrine.⁵⁸ Hōnen, in interpreting the work of his predecessor Genshin, distinguished between what he defined as “miscellaneous” (*zōgyō*) and “right” (*shōgyō*) practices for rebirth, claiming that many traditional Buddhist practices that were miscellaneous were unnecessary to achieve rebirth. He then went a step further, claiming that all but one of the right practices were auxiliary (*jōgo*); that only the practice of recitative *nenbutsu* in its most basic form – the simple recitation of Amida Buddha’s name – was in fact necessary to reach the Pure Land as it was based on Amida’s “original vow”.⁵⁹ The eighteenth of Amida’s forty-eight vows as he yet lived as a bodhisattva by the name of Dharmākara is the most important to Jōdo Pure Land faith. This vow of Amida’s (as paraphrased by Hōnen) stated that upon reaching

⁵⁷ Rhodes and Payne, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*..., 6, 245-258. Contemplative *nenbutsu* is a bit more complex than the simple description provided in what is required/advised in its practice. For a more in-depth exploration of contemplative *nenbutsu* beyond this simplification I direct you to Rhodes and Payne’s work.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 290.

⁵⁹ Hōnen, *Hōnen’s Senchakushū: Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow*. trans. *Senchakushū* English Translation Project (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press & Tokyo: Taishō University, 1998), 40-41, 146-147.

enlightenment, any person who recited his name ten times would be reborn into his Pure Land and that if that there were any who were not born there “through the power of [his] vows”, then he would not reach Buddhahood.⁶⁰ Thus, the logic runs that since Dharmākara attained Buddhahood and became Amida Buddha, he had fulfilled his vow and guaranteed salvation for any who recite his name. Shigehira and Hōnen’s meeting appears then as an obvious narrative point closely associated with Pure Land through the practice of *nenbutsu*, with Hōnen’s appearance itself being a clear indicator of the *Heike monogatari*’s religious ties as well.

Nenbutsu as a practice within the *Heike monogatari*, however, is not exclusive to just Shigehira’s story and meeting with Hōnen. Recall the final moments leading up to Emperor Antoku’s demise in the introductory narrative. Before Antoku and his grandmother dive into the sea, she instructs him to first look east and bid farewell to the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu of the native Japanese Shinto religion) and then to look west, in the direction of Amida’s Pure Land Paradise, and chant “Hail Amida Buddha.” We witness during the climax of the *Heike monogatari* the destruction of Antoku as a symbol of Heike hegemony, greed, and sin. Simultaneously, however, accompanying this pinnacle moment is the plea of an emperor of Japan, imploring Amida Buddha to take mercy upon his soul: the soul of a child held victim to his grandfather’s grand machinations. At the narrative peak of the story, Hōnen’s *nenbutsu*, a religious concept not properly developed until after the conflict of the Genpei War, is deliberately mentioned by Antoku’s grandmother and performed by the boy himself without the appearance or intervention of Hōnen as a religious actor in their story at any point. In utilizing contextual evidence related to Pure Land rhetoric and other evidence of the narrative and historical construction of the *Heike monogatari*, it becomes plainly clear how the epic utilizes and conveys Pure Land soteriology within its narrative in relation to Antoku’s demise.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 94-95; Rhodes and Payne, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*..., 288, 295.

Later, following the previous scene, we once more find Shigehira in the moments leading up to his execution. On his way to Nara for his sentencing, he asks the soldiers escorting him if he could see his wife one last time who he had heard now lived with her elder sister near the route they are traveling after her capture at the Battle of Dan-no-ura. Moved by his words, they permit him the chance to see her. Following a brief, but tearful reunion with his wife, Shigehira quickly departs so as to not keep his escort waiting. His wife begs and pleads for him not to leave so soon, but he responds humbly, telling her that he has come to a silent revelation. “It is the realization that men are not made to live forever. Let me see you again in the next world.”⁶¹ Shigehira, in the last chapter of the second-to-last book of the *Heike monogatari*, ties together in a single sentence the reality Pure Land rhetoric tries to convey in its focus on what comes after death. Having been one of the witnesses to the downfall and annihilation of his once untouchable clan throughout the story, Shigehira comes to the conclusion that nothing is permanent or meant to last forever, men least of all. Genshin corroborates that “Those who flourish now must decline; those who meet must part again.”⁶² The ever present theme of impermanence is poignant in the last chapters of the *Heike monogatari*, serving to further cement the tale’s connection to Pure Land Buddhism as the soteriology is incorporated in many of the final narrative points.

After having departed, Shigehira is soon within the custody of the monks of Nara, who swiftly call for his beheading. Taken to the bank of the Kizu River, where he is to breathe his last, Shigehira asks if he may supplicate himself before the image of Buddha before his end. A warrior that was once under Shigehira’s command in attendance of the execution produces an image of Amida Buddha for his master.⁶³ Before it, Shigehira repents for his crimes, but openly acknowledges that his repentance will amount to nothing. He throws himself completely upon

⁶¹ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*: ..., 713.

⁶² Genshin, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*:..., 67.

⁶³ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*: ..., 714.

the mercy of Amida Buddha and chants his name so that the Buddha may purify and welcome him into the Pure Land. “Thus, invoking Amida ten times, he stretched out his neck and the blow fell upon it.”⁶⁴ Once again, the practice of *nenbutsu* is prominent at an integral story point, helping illuminate the despair Shigehira feels while providing him a means for salvation. It is likely that this story resonated deeply for those living in the Age of the Latter Law, reassuring them and others who feared for their own salvation that even a pitiful historic figure like Shigehira could be granted mercy and the chance to escape from the hells and the six paths by Amida’s saving grace.

Women Within the *Heike monogatari* as Pure Land Practitioners and Embodiments of Faith

Mentioned briefly in the introduction was the fact that Pure Land did not discriminate against typical defining characteristics such as sex or class, and this extended to the practice of *nenbutsu* as well. Genshin argued that the practice of *nenbutsu* did not “distinguish among males and females, nobles and commoners,” and Hōnen too maintained this view when refining it purely into its recitative form.⁶⁵ This made Pure Land and *nenbutsu* appealing to groups who the popular traditional Tendai Buddhist institutions of the Heian era often marginalized and excluded. Women were the most notable among them as they were barred from directly participating in Tendai religious temples and schools which were dominated by men. This tension is prominent within the *Heike monogatari*, which Ruch argues that “as a story of the rise and fall of men, it is fundamentally a tale about women”, claiming that it “has been framed [around] the victorious salvation of [them]” and such an interpretation is apt.⁶⁶ Evidence from the tale supports this perspective in relation to fundamental ties of Pure Land practice.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 715.

⁶⁵ Rhodes and Payne, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*..., 226, 295; Hōnen, *Hōnen’s Senchakushū*..., 77.

⁶⁶ Ruch, “The Other Side...”, 534.

I should note that some sources find that Kenreimon-In lived a few decades longer than what is listed in the *Heike monogatari*, having passed away living in Kyoto instead of at the Ōhara mountain hamlet.

From the tale of Lady Giō in the early chapters of the *Heike monogatari*'s first book to the death of Kiyomori's daughter Kenreimon-In (1155-1191) in the final chapter of the epic's concluding epilogue, the stories of women remain fundamental to the recitation of the tale as they are the prominent heroines who suffer as a result of the "pride and vainglorious ambition of the powerful."⁶⁷ They are the ones who live on in the steads of the men who created the conflict of the Genpei War, yet even in life they exemplify the idea of impermanence so completely in how their lives are fundamentally altered. Recall Shigehira's wife with how wretched a state she was left in after her husband's capture and her own. The conflict ripped away the life she once knew and "[n]othing was left for her but to spend her days in vain weeping and wailing."⁶⁸ After her husband's visit and final departure, she tries to chase after him before remembering his final words to her and, realizing the futility of continuing her pursuit, collapses on the ground prostrate in her grief. She, like many other women in the story, come to terms with what the Pure Land teachings try to convey throughout the narrative about the inexorable march of life.

No other character's transformation and realization is so obvious as that of Kenreimon-In however. The epilogue of the *Heike monogatari* solely follows Kenreimon-In as one of the last living members of the Heike clan and its dissolved hegemony. Complicit in the schemes of her father as the mother of Antoku, she remained an integral figure within the tale, especially in its closing moments, as a reminder of all the Heike had lost over the course of the war. From the heights of the aristocracy and being the empress of Japan as Emperor Takakura's (1161-1181) imperial consort, she is cast down and becomes a nun in the final years of her life.⁶⁹

Kenreimon-In (alongside many other women) at the Battle of Dan-no-ura was unable to throw herself to the waves like her own mother did. After her capture, she secluded herself away in a

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 532.

⁶⁸ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*: ..., 713.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 763-765.

mountain hamlet as a nun since everything she once held dear no longer existed after the Genpei War. Lori Meeks in her work discussing Kenreimon-In's legacy, explores the epilogue and concludes that Kenreimon-In lived as a nun so that she could herald the souls of her departed family into the afterlife through prayer.⁷⁰

The second to last chapter in which Kenreimon-In converses with the cloistered emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192) corroborates this. In Kenreimon-In's discussion with the cloistered emperor, she recalls her past and describes in excruciating detail her unceremonious downfall alongside that of her clan, from grandiose heights to utter ruin. Her very life serves as a terrible reminder of the impermanence of her clan's existence in alignment with Pure Land concepts. She further tells him of how her mother beseeched her moments before jumping into the sea to live so that she could pray for her and her son's departed spirits. Following that, Kenreimon-In tells him of her troubled dreams where she witnesses her clan and the Six Realms (six paths) and how the experiences have led her to chant sutras and prayers in their names.⁷¹ After Go-Shirakawa takes his leave, barely restraining his tears, she prays once more for her son's attainment of Buddhahood and her clan's salvation before finally turning to the west with adjoined palms praying further that "May all the departed spirits of the past attain Buddhahood in paradise!"⁷² She indirectly calls upon Amida Buddha's salvation in saving the Heike and redeeming the sins of her father who had failed to pay respect to the throne and the people in his quest for dominance. Years pass in devout prayer before she finds herself gravely ill.

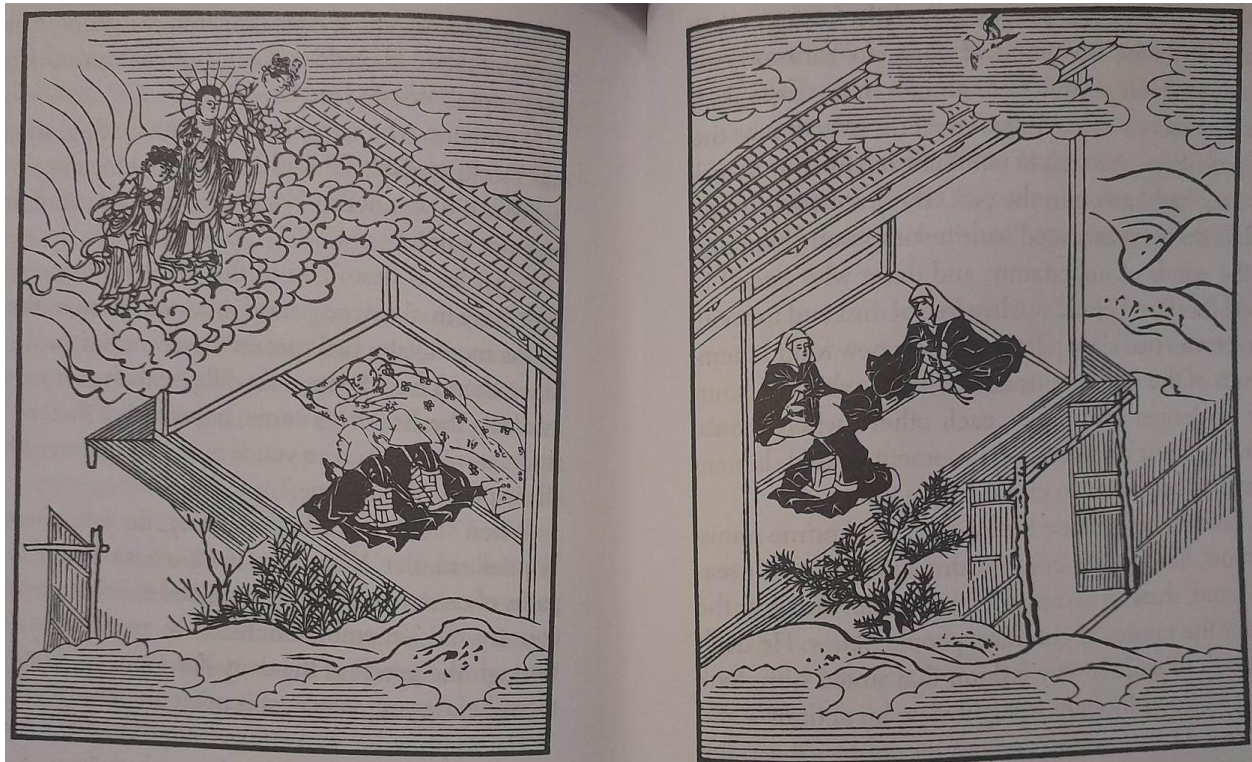
Seated silently before an image of Amida Buddha, Kenreimon-In grasps gently at a five-colored cord which extends to the likeness of the savior to the West. Flanked on both sides

⁷⁰ Lori Meeks, "Survival and Salvation in the *Heike monogatari*," in *Lovable Losers: The Heike in Action and Memory*, ed. Mikael S. Adolphson and Anne Commons (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 158-159. I suggest an extended reading of Meeks' work in *Lovable Losers* as it provides useful insight to some of the more complex aspects of the *Heike monogatari*'s themes such as honor and suicide in relation to Kenreimon-In.

⁷¹ Kitagawa and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike: ...*, 775-778.

⁷² *Ibid*, 780.

by her only two remaining attendants, she chants quietly with her ailing strength. Her attendants know what this is; they know her time is coming to an end and they weep openly and profusely beside her. For so many years, Kenreimon-in had prayed for the souls of her clansmen. She had prayed for the soul of her son, Antoku. She had prayed for the soul of her mother, Tokiko. Now, she prays for herself. The once beautiful and grand Empress Kenreimon-In, now reduced to such a humble and pitiful state, prays with a faltering voice: “Hail to the savior of the world, Amida Buddha in paradise – I pray thee to lead me to thy land.”⁷³ As her voice wanes, falling more silent with each devout recitation of *nenbutsu*, purple clouds gently breeze over the mountains from the west like cherry blossoms on the wind. A heavenly and divine scent descends from above as celestial music encompasses the room... And then nothing. Kenreimon-In who had once relished in the vanity of life, was now as evanescent as those who went before her.⁷⁴



⁷³ *Ibid*, 781.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 781-782.

Figure 5: *Ken'reimonin* (right) together with the nuns *Dainagon-no-suke* and *Awa-no-naishi*, pray to the Buddha. *Ken'reimonin* (left) is welcomed to the Pure Land by Amida Buddha and two bodhisattvas riding on a lavender cloud.

Source: Shirane, *The Tales of the Heike* (translated by Burton Watson), p. 166-167.

As Kenreimon-In recites the *nenbutsu* in her final moments, she is welcomed into the Pure Land, presumably alongside her clan, to attain Buddhahood and enjoy eternal bliss at the mercy of Amida Buddha. The *Heike monogatari*, in its opening words, states that “all who flourish are destined to decay. Yes, pride must have its fall, for it is as unsubstantial as a dream on a spring night. The brave and violent man – he too must die away in the end, like a whirl of dust in the wind.”⁷⁵ The Heike clan met a swift and decisive end and Kiyomori’s unceasing efforts to enshrine his clan’s legacy only further accelerated the process and condemned them all to damnation as they were swept away in devastating conflict before being pushed into the western sea. However, the simple piety and devotion of a woman deprived of all she once held dear praying to and reciting the name of Amida Buddha is what remained. And it is that which guaranteed salvation in Amida’s Pure Land Paradise.

Conclusion

Altogether, Kakuichi’s *Heike monogatari* weaves Pure Land Buddhist soteriology into its narrative and in doing so helped to propagate the religious rhetoric of Pure Land discourse. This thesis proves it through thorough examination of the war tale’s historical and narrative past, its authorship, and examples of Pure Land Buddhism found within its content. The *Heike monogatari*’s popularity in Japanese culture stemmed from a variety of factors related to spiritual and societal decline in the wake of devastating conflicts and paradigm shifts in existing religious institutions as a result of *mappō*. Following the events of the Genpei War alongside the rise of

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

the Kamakura *bakufu* as fundamental turning points in society, budding Pure Land ideals stemming from Genshin and Hōnen began to find roots among the disillusioned and devastated common masses. In this era, some of the first variants and revisions of the *Heike monogatari* began to arise, with the *Hiramatsuke* text chief among them as a religious text imbued with Pure Land Buddhist concepts. As the story began to evolve over the 13th and 14th century it gained popularity in the form of recitation and found its way into the repertoire of *biwa hōshi* story-tellers who became instrumental in heralding the tale across Japan. Eventually the tale arrived at its most popular form under the stewardship of the *biwa hōshi* Kakuichi who eloquently fused Pure Land Buddhism, religious spiritualism, and epic conflict into a definitive edition of the *Heike monogatari*. This variant would capture the minds of its audiences, who found its themes relatable living in a country perpetually embroiled in conflict, and would assist in the dissemination of Pure Land soteriology which is rife within its narrative.

We see this briefly in the introductory story of Antoku and his grandmother as the young emperor prays to Amida Buddha before diving into the sea at the Battle of Dan-no-ura. From more explicit examples, it becomes clear how interwoven rudimentary Pure Land ideas are in the war tale. The whole of the *Heike monogatari* embodies the Buddhist notion of impermanence: that nothing is meant to persist in life and all is destined to eventually decay and pass away into oblivion. Kiyomori, Shigehira, and Kenreimon-In all meet their ends at the closing of their narratives along with the overall annihilation of their clan throughout the Genpei War at the hands of the Genji clan. Kiyomori's karmic debt, as a result of his greed, grew so severe that it not only sealed his own fate within the six paths in the deepest pits of the hells, but also shackled the rest of his clan to the same destiny of destruction and suffering. Shigehira, for the sins committed in burning the holy temples of Nara, was bound for execution by the monks who

lived there, and although he was able to find deliverance through the Pure Land practice of *nenbutsu*, he is unable to escape the inevitable end. Kenreimon-In, who had once been the empress of Japan, became a humble nun after the Genpei War who lived day-by-day praying for the souls of her deceased clan by reciting the name of Amida Buddha and she too met her own demise at the hands of an illness. However, her efforts, like Shigehira's, were able to bring about her own salvation alongside that of the departed Heike. She was able to reach the Western Paradise through absolute devotion to Amida Buddha and freed her clansmen from suffering within the six paths. Although all they had left behind was gone, their legacy reduced to impermanent ash, they were able to still find liberation in spite of Kiyomori's sins. The *Heike monogatari* shows the depravities of war and its consequences on life, how it upsets the balance of comfort and throws the best laid plans into disarray, and that, ultimately, all is vanity and evanescence and the only escape for any who heeds the tale is through Pure Land Buddhism and Amida's mercy.

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Appendix 1: Chronology

Heian Era: 794–1185

- ❖ 942
 - Genshin's Birth
- ❖ 985
 - *Ōjōyōshū* is finished
- ❖ 1017
 - Genshin's Death
- ❖ 1052
 - Start of the Age of the Latter Law – Age of the Latter Dharma/*mappō*
- ❖ 1133
 - Hōnen's Birth
- ❖ 1156-1158
 - Hōgen Insurrection
- ❖ 1159
 - Heiji Insurrection
- ❖ 1171
 - Shinran's Birth
- ❖ 1180-1185
 - Genpei War

Kamakura Era: 1185 – 1333

- ❖ 1192
 - Establishment of the Kamakura *bakufu*.
- ❖ 1198
 - *Senchakushū* is finished. Only distributed among trusted disciples
- ❖ 1212
 - Hōnen's Death
 - *Senchakushū* is finally propagated following Hōnen's death
- ❖ 1218-1221
 - First known instance of the *Heike monogatari* appears.
- ❖ <1240~
 - *Hiramatsuke* variant of the *Heike monogatari* is made
- ❖ 1262
 - Shinran's Death
- ❖ 1299
 - Kakuichi's Birth
- ❖ 1300-1340
 - *Chikuhakeun* variant of the *Heike monogatari* is made

Transition Period: 1331-1336

- ❖ 1331-1333

- Genkō War

- ❖ 1336

- Establishment of the Muromachi *bakufu*

Muromachi Era: 1336-1573

- ❖ 1371

- *Kakuichi* variant of the *Heike monogatari* is finished

- Kakuichi's Death

Appendix 2: Glossary – Important Figures, Terms, and Events

Notable Pure Land Proselytizers

Genshin (942-1017)

- ❖ *Ōjōyōshū* (985)
- ❖ First laid the framework and proposed ideas for Pure Land in Japan
- ❖ His Pure Land idea's, as fundamental roots of the religious discourse, are quite prevalent in the *Heike monogatari*'s narrative

Hōnen (1133-1212)

- ❖ *Senchakushū* (1198)
- ❖ Founder of the first Pure Land Buddhist school of Japan (Jōdo Pure Land)
- ❖ Drew on and revised many of the ideas set forth by his predecessor Genshin in *Ōjōyōshū*
- ❖ Appears in the *Heike monogatari*'s narrative to consult Taira no Shigehira, informing him of Pure Land faith and *nenbutsu* practice
- ❖ His Pure Land school's ideas are the most dominant in the *Heike monogatari*'s narrative

Kakuichi (1299-1371)

- ❖ *Heike monogatari* – *Kakuichi* variant (1371)
- ❖ Notable *biwa hōshi*
- ❖ Creator of the most recognized form of the *Heike monogatari*.

Shinran (1171-1262)

- ❖ Notable disciple of Hōnen
- ❖ Founder of True Pure Land school (Shin Buddhism)
- ❖ Further revised the ideas of his teacher Hōnen, leading to a radical simplification of Pure Land rhetoric
- ❖ Not very pertinent to the *Heike monogatari*'s narrative

Notable Religious Figures and Terms

Amida Buddha

- ❖ Main Buddha (i.e. god) of Pure Land Buddhist faith
- ❖ In life he was known as Dharmākara, a bodhisattva
- ❖ Upon attaining enlightenment he created a Western Paradise which transcends the six paths

Biwa hōshi

- ❖ Blind priests who carried *biwa*'s, lute-like instruments they would play during lyrical recitations of religious stories
- ❖ Traditionally attached to either temples around Kyoto or traveled across the country
- ❖ Common in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods

Bodhisattva

- ❖ An enlightened individual who has delayed their own attainment of buddhahood to assist others on the path enlightenment

- ❖ OR an individual who is on the path to enlightenment and buddhahood in Buddhist religion

Karma

- ❖ Its accrual through good or bad deeds (physically and mentally) across current and past existences is what determines where one is reborn in the six paths

Mappō

- ❖ Also known as the Age of the Latter Law
- ❖ The degenerate period in Buddhist religion in which people are unable to attain spiritual awakening through individual effort
- ❖ Inspired existential crisis among traditional Buddhist institutions and practitioners among the population
- ❖ Led many to fear being stuck within the cycle of death and rebirth in the six paths

Nenbutsu (Recitative)

- ❖ The act of reciting Amida Buddha's name for the chance at rebirth in his Western Paradise
- ❖ Required sincerity to be effective
- ❖ Simplification of original *nenbutsu* practiced as established by Genshin
- ❖ *Namu Amidabutsu*

Pure Land Buddhism (Religion)

- ❖ A branch of Buddhism which places its faith in the religious figure of Amida Buddha
- ❖ Main practice was that of *nenbutsu* recitation
- ❖ Very popular because it presented all a chance at salvation; man or woman, rich or poor, pious or sinner

Pure Land Paradise (Place)

- ❖ Realm of Amida Buddha which exists above the six paths on a seventh metaphysical plane, located far to the west
- ❖ Rebirth here effectively guaranteed everlasting bliss as one worked to reach enlightenment and buddhahood outside the six paths

Six Paths

- ❖ Cycle of death and rebirth in Buddhism that is divided into six realms of reincarnation
- ❖ The paths in the descending order of suffering to be endured:
 - Hells
 - Realm of Hungry Spirits
 - Realm of Beasts
 - Realm of Furious Demons (*ashura*)
 - Realm of Human Beings
 - Realm of Heavenly Beings

Notable Actors and Events Depicted in the *Heike monogatari*

Antoku (1178-1185)

- ❖ Child emperor born to Emperor Takakura and Kenreimon-In
- ❖ Representation of Heike hegemony
- ❖ Died via suicide at the Battle of Dan-no-ura
- ❖ Son of Kenreimon-In
- ❖ Nephew of Shigehira
- ❖ Grandson of Go-Shirakawa, Kiyomori, and Tokiko

Battle of Dan-no-ura (1185)

- ❖ Final climactic battle of the Genpei War in which the Heike were driven to sea before being defeated completely.

Genpei War (1180-1185)

- ❖ Conflict between the Heike (Taira) and Genji (Minamoto) clans for dominance of Japan
- ❖ Incited by Prince Mochihito
- ❖ Initial main leading figures of each force were Taira no Kiyomori and Minamoto no Yoritomo
- ❖ Discussed at length as the main conflict within the *Heike monogatari*

Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192)

- ❖ Cloistered emperor who appears frequently within the *Heike monogatari* as a recurrent actor
- ❖ Father of Emperor Takakura
- ❖ Grandfather of Antoku

Kenreimon-In (1155-1191)

- ❖ Name before becoming empress of Japan was Taira no Tokuko
- ❖ Most dominant figure in the epilogue of the *Heike monogatari*
- ❖ Was the wife of Emperor Takakura and gave birth to Antoku as the first emperor of Heike blood
- ❖ She prayed devoutly for the souls of her departed clansmen in the hopes of saving them from terrible fates within the six path
- ❖ Daughter of Kiyomori and Tokiko
- ❖ Sister of Shigehira
- ❖ Mother of Antoku

Minamoto no Yorimasa (1106-1180)

- ❖ Persuaded Prince Mochihito to engage in conflict with the Heike clan with the assistance of the Genji clan.

Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199)

- ❖ Leader of the Genji (Minamoto) clan during the Genpei War
- ❖ Established the Kamakura *bakufu* and became the first *shogun* of Japan
- ❖ Half-brother of Yoshitsune

Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189)

- ❖ Leading general of the Genji (Minamoto) clan's armies during the Genpei War
- ❖ Half-brother of Yoritomo

Prince Mochihito (1151-1180)

- ❖ Incited the Genpei War in an attempt to claim the imperial throne and remove the Heike hegemony
- ❖ Died during the Battle of Uji (1180)
- ❖ Son of Go-Shirakawa
- ❖ Brother of Emperor Takakura

Taira no Kiyomori (1118-1181)

- ❖ Head of the Heike (Taira) clan
- ❖ Main antagonist of the *Heike monogatari*
- ❖ Held to be responsible for the events of the Genpei War as a result of his evil deeds
- ❖ Died from horrific and unnatural fever
- ❖ Husband of Taira no Tokiko
- ❖ Father of Kenreimon-In and Shigehira
- ❖ Grandfather of Antoku

Taira no Shigehira (1156-1185)

- ❖ Lieutenant General of Heike forces
- ❖ Notable for having led the forces at the Siege of Nara (1180) where much of the temple grounds were destroyed in a fire set by one of the men under his command
- ❖ Appears as a very repentant figure within the *Heike monogatari*'s narrative as a victim of fate after capture at the hands of the Genji as he is held responsible for the events at Nara
- ❖ Meets Hōnen during the *Heike monogatari*'s narrative where he learns of Pure Land faith and the practice of *nenbutsu*
- ❖ Died via execution by the monks of Nara
- ❖ Son of Kiyomori
- ❖ Brother of Kenreimon-in
- ❖ Uncle of Antoku

Taira no Tokiko

- ❖ Name after Buddhist vows, as Nun of the Second Rank, was Nii-dono.
- ❖ Important figure in the suicide of Antoku and recurrent actor in the *Heike monogatari*
- ❖ Died via suicide at the Battle of Dan-no-ura
- ❖ Wife of Shigehira
- ❖ Mother of Kenreimon-In
- ❖ Grandmother of Antoku

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