

#### THE STORY OF YOSHITSUNE (GIKEIKI, CA. 1411)

*The Story of Yoshitsune*, like *The Tales of the Soga Brothers* (*Soga monogatari*, late thirteenth and early fourteenth century), belongs to the broader genre of military narratives (*gunki-mono*) like *The Tales of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*, early thirteenth century) and the *Taiheiki* (*Chronicle of Great Peace*, 1340s–1371). In contrast to the other military narratives, which describe large numbers of samurai, *Gikeiki* and *Soga monogatari* are biographical, tracing the life of a noted warrior from birth to death. *Gikeiki*, which was originally called *Hōgan monogatari* (*Tale of the Lieutenant*), and *Yoshitsune monogatari* (*Tale of Yoshitsune*) focus on the life of Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159–1189) and his chief retainer, Benkei, whereas *Soga monogatari* follows the lives of the Soga brothers.

*Gikeiki*, based on local folk stories from the fifteenth century, was written later than the other noted military tales. While many of these local legends may have originated in the northeast area of Honshū, *Gikeiki* appears to be glued together, as Yanagida Kunio noted, with “the cement made in Kyoto.” The narrative reflects the values and perspectives of the urban commoner in Kyoto, and in this sense it has much in common with the *otogi-zōshi* (Muromachi tales), which flourished from the fourteenth through the early seventeenth century and which the urban commoners also were enjoying at this time. In this regard, *Gikeiki* differs from *Soga monogatari*, which is about the lives of farmers, warriors, and local barons in the Kantō area. This also helps explain why *Gikeiki*, a tragic story full of pathos, is at the same time a very bright and lively tale, reflecting the optimistic spirit of the Kyoto inhabitants in the Muromachi period.

Yoshitsune's most glorious moment occurred in 1184, when, as a Minamoto commander, he decisively defeated the Heike clan during the Genpei war, a sequence depicted in *The Tales of the Heike*. *Gikeiki*, however, devotes only several lines to this part of his life and instead concentrates on Yoshitsune's youth and his demise, as if to leave the most glorious moments to *The Tales of the Heike*. One of the salient characteristics of *Gikeiki*, particularly in the second part, is referred to today as *hōgan-biiki* (rooting for Lieutenant Yoshitsune), a phrase that has come to mean rooting for the underdog. As a military leader, Yoshitsune destroyed the enemy of the imperial court (the Heike), but rather than being rewarded, he was chased out of the capital and forced to wander in the hills and mountains. *Gikeiki* portrays his tragic fall sympathetically, revealing two contrasting sides of Yoshitsune. The first part, books one through three, describes him—as does *The Tales of the Heike*—as a vigorous, mobile, and quick-witted man with almost superhuman martial ability. In the second half,

books five through eight, Yoshitsune becomes, by contrast, a gentle and indecisive character, lacking mobility and judgment—probably to enhance his tragic, underdog quality—and the focus shifts to his vigorous retainers, particularly Benkei. In fact, in the Muromachi period, the stories about Benkei, who does not appear in *The Tales of the Heike*, were probably fused with those of Yoshitsune.

### Book Three

*Books one and two trace the birth and youth of Ushiwaka (Yoshitsune), who has been left to be raised at the Kurama Temple by Minamoto Yoshitomo, a loser in the Heiji rebellion. Ushiwaka is led to Ōshū, in the northeastern part of Honshū, where he defeats the bandit Kusasaka Chōhan. The following sequence describes the birth of his future retainer Musashibō Benkei (called Oniwaka as a child), the son of a Kumano abbot, who is sent to study at the Enryaku-ji temple on Mount Hiei, where he causes havoc. The sequence climaxes with Benkei's encounter with Yoshitsune, who is portrayed in these early books as a gentle, noble-looking, and seemingly inexperienced young man with hidden martial talents.*

#### BENKEI'S BIRTH

The abbot, who had been greatly disturbed by the late arrival of his son, sent someone to the lying-in place to examine him.

"He is as big as most children of two or three. His hair covers his shoulders, and he has enormous teeth—molars, incisors, and all," reported the messenger.

"He must be a devil. He will be an enemy of Buddhism if we keep him. Tie him up and drown him, or crucify him deep in the mountains," directed the abbot.

"No matter what he may be, I have always been told that the bond between a parent and his child lasts for more than one life. How could anyone be so heartless as to kill his own baby?" lamented the mother.

Just then the abbot was visited by his younger sister, the wife of a man called Yamanoi. "What is so queer about the child?" she asked.

"The human gestation period is never less than nine months or more than ten, but this monster stayed in the womb for eighteen. He will be the destruction of his parents if he is spared. We cannot afford to be sentimental," replied the abbot.

"Parents don't need to fear a child just because his gestation period was long," said the baby's aunt. "Huang-shih of China stayed in the womb for eighty years and had snow-white hair when he was born. He was an odd, stunted, dark-faced man who lived for two hundred eighty years, but all the same he is worshiped as the divine messenger of the Great Bodhisattva Hachiman. Give me the boy to take back to the capital. If he turns out well I shall make a proper man of him for Yamanoi; if he proves troublesome he can be a monk."

This proposal impressed the abbot as reasonable, and he therefore agreed to relinquish the child to his sister. She went to the lying-in place, bathed the baby for the first time, christened him Oniwaka, and on the day following the fiftieth-day ceremony<sup>1</sup> took him with her to the capital, where she reared him carefully with the assistance of a nurse.

At the age of five, Oniwaka resembled an ordinary lad of twelve or thirteen. In his sixth year he suffered an attack of smallpox. His aunt, contemplating his scarred, swarthy complexion and unkempt, shoulder-length hair, said to herself, "With that kind of face and hair, he'll never look like anything. I had better make him a monk." She took him to a learned and venerable prelate in the Western Compound of Mount Hiei, known as the Bishop of Sakuramoto. "I should like you to educate this boy, whom I have thought of as a possible adopted son for Yamanoi. He is so ugly that it embarrasses me to bring him, but his mind is quick enough. Won't you teach him to read, even if it's only a single chapter of one sutra? Please correct any faults you may notice in him, and in general treat him exactly as you think best," she said.

As the days and months passed in diligent study at Sakuramoto, Oniwaka showed himself to be an exceptional scholar. "No matter how ugly someone's face may be, it's what he knows that counts," the monks assured him.

There would have been no trouble if Oniwaka had devoted himself seriously to intellectual pursuits, but he was a strong, powerfully built youth, who liked nothing better than to persuade a group of pages and young monks to play wrestling games with him behind a deserted building or in a remote area of the mountain. Once the monks learned of these activities, they complained unceasingly to the bishop. "If Oniwaka wants to waste time, it's his own affair, but he has no business corrupting other people's disciples," they said.

Oniwaka, regarding such critics as his enemies, would burst violently into their quarters to smash the shutters and doors. There seemed no way of moderating his excesses, since no one cared to offend the son of the Kumano abbot, the foster son of Lord Yamanoi, the grandson of the Great Counselor of Second Rank, and the disciple of the chief scholar of the entire temple. As a result, he was continually embroiled in quarrels of his own making. A man going from one place to another would detour to avoid his fists, or step aside hurriedly if he chanced to encounter him. Oniwaka would permit the wayfarer to proceed unchallenged, but on meeting him again would collar him and ask, "Why did you turn away on the path the other day? Do you bear me a grudge, fellow?" Then, as his unfortunate victim's knees quaked with fear, he would twist his arm painfully, or punch him brutally in the chest.

1. *Ika* (no iwai), a ritual inaugurated during the Heian period. The baby boy was fed a special kind of cake by his father or grandfather on the fiftieth day after his birth.

"Bishop's page or no, he has created a problem that affects us all," the monks said, meeting in council. Three hundred of them went off to wait upon the Retired Emperor.

"Get rid of the rascal as fast as you can," His Majesty commanded.

The monks returned to Mount Hiei in high spirits, but soon a council of nobles was convened, in the course of which an old diary was shown to contain the words, "An eccentric person will make his appearance on Mount Hiei sixty-one years from now, and there will be official prayers because of him. If he is disciplined by an ex-emperor's decree, the nation's fifty-four great imperial-vow temples<sup>2</sup> will vanish in a day." That year being the sixty-first, it was decided to let Oniwaka stay.

"So Oniwaka is more important than 3,000 monks! This is preposterous! Let us take out the sacred car of Sannō," said the monks. The court was able to quiet them only by presenting lands to the shrine.

In spite of the monks' efforts to keep all this from coming to Oniwaka's knowledge, someone must have been thoughtless enough to tell him. In his resentment he behaved even more outrageously than before, until the bishop despaired utterly of controlling him. "If he is here, all right; if he is not, that's all right too," he shrugged.

#### BENKEI'S DEPARTURE FROM ENRYAKU-JI TEMPLE

When Oniwaka learned that the bishop had turned against him, he left a Enryaku-ji Temple. "What's the use of staying at Mount Hiei if even my teacher dislikes me?" he said to himself. "I'll disappear somewhere. As things are now, wherever I go people will say, 'That's Oniwaka from Enryaku-ji Temple.' There's nothing wrong with my education. I'll make my way in the world as a monk." Seizing his razor and cassock, he ran to the bathroom of a man called Mimasaka-no-jibukyō, where he washed his hair in a tub and wielded the razor until the reflection of his head in the water was as round as a ball.

"I can't stop with this. I'll have to have a proper monk's name," he then determined.

Long ago Enryaku-ji Temple had harbored a wild monk known as Saitō Musashibō, who, it was said, had sat erect and achieved rebirth on his deathbed at the age of sixty-one, after a career of violence extending back to his twenty-first year. Hoping to become a great warrior by adopting the same name, Oniwaka resolved that he would be known in the future as Saitō Musashibō. For his true name he settled on Benkei, a combination of elements from the names of his father, the abbot Benschō, and his teacher, Kankei.

So yesterday's Oniwaka became today's Musashibō Benkei. For a while he took it upon himself to practice austerities in a deserted building at Ohara-no-bessho, a place frequented occasionally by Hiei monks; but since his appearance and manner had always been unattractive, even during his days as a page, no one offered him sustenance, much less came to call on him, and very shortly he wandered off in disgust, with the notion of traveling from province to province as a pilgrim. Late in the first month of his travels he found himself in Awa. . . .

#### HOW BENKEI STOLE SWORDS IN THE CAPITAL

"A man reckons his wealth in terms of a thousand," thought Benkei. "Hidehira of Ōshū owns 1,000 fine horses, Kikuchi of Tsukushi 1,000 suits of armor, and Tayū of Mutsu 1,000 quivers and 1,000 bows. Since I haven't the money to buy anything, why should I not collect swords by roaming the capital after dark and relieving other fellows of their weapons?" Night after night he followed this plan, until people began saying, "A goblin monk ten feet tall is stalking the capital streets these days, stealing swords." The year drew to a close, and by the end of the Fifth Month or the start of the Sixth Month in the following year, Benkei had accumulated a vast quantity of weapons in the loft of a certain Buddhist hall at Higuchi Karasumaru. On the seventeenth day of the Sixth Month, he found that he possessed exactly 999 swords. That afternoon he made a pious journey to Gojō Tenjin Shrine. "Grant that I may take a prize blade tonight," he prayed as dusk fell.

When the hour had grown late, he walked south from the shrine to loiter near the wall of a private dwelling, hoping that one of Tenjin's worshipers might be wearing a likely weapon. Toward dawn, just as he had started off along Horikawa Avenue, he heard the distant plaintive notes of a flute. "That must be someone on his way to Tenjin for an early morning visit. I wonder whether it's a monk or a layman. If his sword is any good, I shall help myself to it," he thought. Leaning forward as the music drew nearer, he saw a young man, wearing a white blouse, white knickers, and a silver-plated corselet. At his waist hung a magnificent sword decorated with gold.

"What a superb weapon! I must have it," Benkei said to himself eagerly. He was shortly to learn that the stranger was an adversary to beware of, but how was he to know it then?

Yoshitsune, advancing watchfully, saw a menacing armed monk beneath a *muku* tree.

"That fellow has a strange appearance. He must be the one who has been stealing swords in the capital," he thought. He walked on steadily in Benkei's direction.

"I've taken swords away from plenty of seasoned warriors. If I walk up to that boy and tell him to hand his over, my face and voice alone will throw him into

2. Temples erected to fulfill vows sworn by emperors or empresses.

such a panic that he'll agree. If he refuses, I'll knock him down and grab it," thought Benkei. He stepped out and accosted Yoshitsune. "Waiting here quietly for enemies, I find it singular that a fine fellow like you should come along dressed in armor. I can't let you pass without a word. Hand me your sword if you want to go on."

"I've heard that some ass has been around here lately," Yoshitsune answered. "I'm afraid I can't give you my sword as easily as all that. You'll have to come after it if you want it."

"That's all right with me." Benkei drew his sword and lunged at Yoshitsune.

Unsheathing his own weapon, Yoshitsune ran toward his adversary's position near the wall. Benkei sprang back with a tremendous blow in Yoshitsune's direction. "Not even a god dares oppose me!" he shouted.

"The rascal isn't a bad fighter at all," said Yoshitsune, darting under Benkei's left arm like a streak of lightning. Benkei had put such a thrust into his sword that the tip became embedded in the wall. As he sought to release it, Yoshitsune kicked him in the chest with his left foot, lashing out so vigorously that the weapon flew from Benkei's hands. Yoshitsune snatched it up and sprang with a shout to the top of the nine-foot wall, while Benkei stood motionless, half-believing in his astonishment and pain that he had met a devil.

"In the future, don't try any more of your lawless tricks," admonished Yoshitsune. "I've been hearing about you for a long time. I ought to keep your sword, but I don't want you to think I need it. Here!" Holding Benkei's sword against the top of the wall, he bent it out of shape with his foot and threw it down.

With a bitter glance at Yoshitsune, Benkei straightened the weapon. He began to move away, muttering, "You're a better fighter than I imagined. You seem to favor this neighborhood . . . I may not have done so well tonight, but next time I won't be so careless."

"He certainly has the look of a Hiei monk," thought Yoshitsune. "Ah, Hiei monk! You're not what you seem to be!"<sup>3</sup> he mocked.

Benkei was silent, but he resolved to kill him. As Yoshitsune jumped toward the ground, he lunged forward, brandishing his sword; but Yoshitsune leaped blithely back onto the wall while he was still three feet in the air.

When people heard about King Mu of China, who ascended to heaven from the summit of an eight-foot wall after reading *Liu-t'ao*, they always used to say, "That's the kind of miracle that could only have happened in antiquity," but even in our own degenerate times the same book taught Yoshitsune to jump back from mid-air to the top of a nine-foot wall. That night Benkei went home frustrated.

#### HOW BENKEI BECAME YOSHITSUNE'S SWORN RETAINER

On the eighteenth of the Sixth Month, people from all around came flocking to Kiyomizu Kannon to worship. "That fellow I met last night is bound to turn up at Kiyomizu. I'll just have a look," Benkei said to himself. He loitered in the vicinity of the main gate, but Yoshitsune was nowhere to be seen.

It grew late, and Benkei was about to leave in disgust when he heard the strains of a flute floating up from Kiyomizu Hill.

"What an elegant air! It can't be anybody else," he thought. He remained where he was in front of the gate, praying, "This temple was dedicated by Sakanoue Tamaramaro to Kannon, the Enlightened One, who has vowed to remain in the world of men, deferring omniscience, until she has answered all the petitions of humanity in her thirty-three guises. She has also sworn to bring good fortune to everyone who enters the temple precincts. I don't ask for good luck. Simply allow me to take that sword."

Meanwhile Yoshitsune was beginning to feel inexplicably ill at ease. He glanced warily toward the top of the hill and saw that last night's monk was awaiting him, dressed in a corselet and armed with both a sword and a halberd. "The scoundrel! Here he is again tonight!" He continued to advance toward the gate.

"Well, if it isn't the gentleman I met at Tenjin last night!" said Benkei.

"It is," said Yoshitsune.

"Will you give me your sword or won't you?"

"You may ask as much as you like, but I'm not going to hand it over. If you want it, you'll have to come after it."

"Still boasting!" Benkei claimed. Waving his halberd, he charged down the hill, but Yoshitsune, with discouraging adroitness, parried the long blade. "I can't compete with him," Benkei was forced to admit to himself.

"Much as I should like to go on with this for the rest of the night," said Yoshitsune, "I have made a vow to Kannon." And he resumed his progress toward the temple. Benkei was left thinking, "I feel like a man who has lost something he was holding in his hand."

Yoshitsune was reflecting, "He is a brave man. If he's still there at dawn, I'll knock down his sword and halberd, wound him a bit, and capture him. It's no fun doing things all alone. I'll make him my retainer."

The unsuspecting Benkei followed along behind, still intent on the sword. As he entered the Kannon Hall, which was filled with the murmur of worshipers' voices, he heard someone beside the inner lattice reverently reciting the opening lines of the first chapter of the Lotus Sutra. "That's the voice of the fellow who called me a scoundrel. I'll just have a look," he thought. He laid his halberd on the threshold and, unarmed save for his sword, pushed rudely through the crowd inside, saying "I'm a temple official; make way, please." When he reached the position behind the chanting Yoshitsune, he planted

3. He means that Benkei does not live up to his fierce appearance.



himself with his legs wide apart. People who saw him in the light from the altar lamps said, "What a grim-looking monk! He's a giant!"

"How did he know I was here?" Yoshitsune wondered. To Benkei's surprise, he was now dressed as a woman, with a cloak over his head. Confused but determined, Benkei rapped him smartly in the side with his sheath. "Whether you're a page or a lady, I'm a worshiper too. Move over," he demanded. When Yoshitsune failed to reply, Benkei gave him a powerful shove, thinking, "This is no ordinary person. It must be my man."

"You pest!" exclaimed Yoshitsune. "A beggar like you can pray under a tree or a thatched roof; you'll be heard right enough. What do you mean by creating a disturbance where important people are worshiping? Get out!"

"That's an unfriendly thing to say to someone you've known since last night. Make room." While the spectators watched in shocked disapproval, Benkei jumped nimbly across two mats to Yoshitsune's side, snatched up the sutra, and flipped it open. "What a handsome sutra! Is it yours or somebody else's?" As Yoshitsune remained silent, he began to recite, saying, "Come, read it with me."

Benkei had been one of the most famous sutra readers in the Western Compound, and Yoshitsune had been well trained as a page at Kurama. As they read the first half of the second scroll in alternation, with Benkei taking the lead and Yoshitsune following, the noisy crowd of pilgrims grew still, and the devotees stopped ringing their bells. An indescribable aura of sanctity pervaded the quiet night.

After a time Yoshitsune arose, saying, "I must speak to an acquaintance. We shall meet again."

"If I can't hold onto a man while he's right in front of me, am I likely to see him again? Let's go together," said Benkei, pulling him by the hand. When they reached the south door, he continued, "I am in earnest about wanting your sword. Will you give it to me?"

"I can't do that; it's an heirloom," Yoshitsune replied.

"All right, then, let me win it from you in a fair match."

"Very well. We shall fight for it."

The two drew their swords and began to fence briskly.

"What's the meaning of this?" complained the spectators. "Imagine fighting in a cramped space like this—to say nothing of picking on a boy! Put away your sword, monk." Benkei ignored them.

When Yoshitsune threw off his outer cloak, revealing the blouse, knickers, and corselet beneath, the awed spectators knew that he was no ordinary person. Such was the excitement among the visiting ladies, nuns, and children that some of them fell off the veranda, while the men rushed to close the doors to the hall so as to keep the combatants outside.

Presently Yoshitsune and Benkei made their way down to the dance platform, without a break in their fighting. The spectators, who had at first been afraid

to venture close, now began to walk around them in fascination, like people performing a circumambulation ritual.<sup>4</sup>

"Who will win, the page or the monk?" someone asked.

"The page can't lose. The monk's out of his class; he's tired already," replied someone else.

"It looks as if I am done for," thought Benkei, disheartened by this judgment, but he fought doggedly on. Suddenly, Yoshitsune seized a chance opening to run forward and thrust the point of his weapon into Benkei's left side below his arm. Then, as Benkei faltered, he struck him again and again with the back of his sword until he lay stretched out with his head toward the east.

"What do you say? Are you willing to follow me?" Yoshitsune demanded, planting a foot on the monk's prostrate body.

"This must be my karma from a previous existence. I will serve you," Benkei promised.

Yoshitsune put on Benkei's corselet over his own, took up both swords, and before daybreak had come, marched him to Yamashina, where he remained with him until the wound had healed. Then the two went to the capital to observe the activities of the Heike.

Once Benkei had become Yoshitsune's retainer, he followed him as faithfully as a shadow, performing innumerable gallant deeds during his master's three-year campaign against the Heike. He was that very Musashibō Benkei who remained with Yoshitsune to the end and fell beside him in the last battle at Koromogawa in Ōshū. . . .

## Book Seven

*After his victory over the Heike as a military commander, Yoshitsune is slandered by Kajiwaru Kagetoki and hunted down by his suspicious elder brother Yoritomo, the Kamakura shogun. Yoshitsune escapes to Kyushu, then to the hills of Yoshino, where he parts from his lover Shizuka, and then proceeds to the Hokuriku (Japan Sea side) area with Benkei. Here Yoshitsune and his entourage are disguised as mountain priests as they desperately attempt to flee. In this famous scene, Benkei acts dramatically to save his master from detection.*

### HOW BENKEI FLOGGED YOSHITSUNE AT NYOI CROSSING

The next morning Yoshitsune and his men prepared to cross the river near Nyo-i-no-jō.

"There's a little matter I must mention," said the ferryman, Hei Gon-no-kami. "The warden of Etchū lives near here. It's all right for me to pass three

4. A Buddhist ceremony in which chanting monks circle around a sacred image or hall.

or four ascetics without any questions, but I'm supposed to report to him before I take over any party of ten or more. Since there are seventeen or eighteen of you, I shall have to be careful. I'll let you cross after I tell the warden."

"Come now, is there anyone on the Hokurikudō who doesn't recognize Sanuki from Haguro?" asked Benkei in an annoyed tone.

A man who was seated in the middle of the boat looked at him closely. "Yes, yes, I'm sure that I've seen him before. That's the monk who purified me with sacred strips of paper the year before last, and the year before that, not only when I went up the mountain, but also when I came down," he said.

"Your memory is excellent," said Benkei jubilantly.

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" said Gon-no-kami to the passenger. "Since you recognize him, I suppose you won't mind taking the responsibility for letting him cross."

"If you think anybody in this boat is Yoshitsune, point him out," invited Benkei.

"The fellow in the bow looks suspicious—the one wearing the robe with the design of a plover flock," replied Gon-no-kami.

"That's the monk we took in tow at Shirayama in Kaga. We can't afford to be objects of suspicion everywhere just because of him," grumbled Benkei.

While Yoshitsune hung his head in silence, Benkei leaped angrily onto the gunwale of the boat, seized his master's arm, hoisted him over his shoulder, and jumped to the beach. Then he dumped him roughly onto the sand and with a fan which he pulled from his waist began to beat him so mercilessly that the onlookers averted their eyes. Though Yoshitsune's wife forced herself to appear unconcerned, she was hardly able to refrain from shrieking aloud.

"Nobody is more cruel than a Haguro ascetic," said Gon-no-kami. "If you had simply said, 'That's not Yoshitsune,' it would have been enough. It's painful to watch you beat him so harshly; I feel as though I'd been hitting him myself. What a pitiful sight! Get back in." He pulled the boat over and took them aboard. "All right, hurry up and pay your fare," he said. . . .

With the Rokudōji crossing successfully behind them, they walked on toward the Nago Woods, while Benkei tried vainly to forget his recent actions. At length he ran up to Yoshitsune, caught hold of his sleeve, and burst out crying. "What kind of business was that—protecting my master by beating him? I shall be punished by everybody—gods, bodhisattvas, and men. Forgive me, Great Bodhisattava Hachiman! Oh, what a wretched world this is!" The other warriors wept loudly at the sight of the indomitable Benkei groveling miserably on the ground.

"It wasn't your fault," said Yoshitsune. "I can't hold back the tears when I think of what will become of you men who have stood by an unlucky master for so long." He pressed his sleeve to his eyes, and the tears of the others fell all the faster. . . .

## Book Eight

*Yoshitsune and his entourage flee from the Hokuriku region to Ōshū, northeastern Honshū, where Yoshitsune is betrayed by Fujiwara Yasuhira. In the battle at Koromogawa River, near Hiraizumi, facing a large Kamakura army, Yoshitsune and his retainers (Mashio, Washinoo, Ise Saburō, Benkei, and Kataoka) come to an end. The following scene describes Benkei's death.*

### THE BATTLE OF KOROMOGAWA

. . . After engaging first one enemy and then another, Benkei had by now suffered a jagged wound in the glottis which bled as though it would never stop. The loss of so much blood would have made an ordinary man's senses reel, but Benkei seemed all the livelier for it and was fighting as though the enemy were hardly worth his attention, while the blood poured down his chest and flowed steadily onto the ground from his moving armor.

"That monk is crazy," said one enemy warrior. "He's got his *horo*<sup>5</sup> on backward."

"Stay away from him; there's no telling what he'll do," warned another.

They all pulled back on their reins and kept their distance from the wily veteran, who was managing somehow still to spring erect whenever he appeared on the verge of collapse. Not a soul was willing to confront him as he dashed up and down the river bank.

Mashio Jūrō, meanwhile, had perished, and Bizen Heishirō had taken his own life after killing many enemies and suffering grievous wounds. Kataoka and Washinoo fought as a team until Washinoo died with five enemies to his credit. Since Kataoka was then in an exposed position, Benkei and Ise Saburō hastened to his assistance. Ise Saburō fought gloriously, killing six warriors and wounding three more, before his own injuries forced him to turn his sword on himself. "I will wait for you at Shide Mountain," he promised the others.

Then Benkei forced a path through the enemy and made his way to Yoshitsune. "Here I am," he said.

Yoshitsune had been reciting the eighth book of the Lotus Sutra. "What have you to report?" he asked.

"The battle is over. Washinoo, Mashio, the Suzuki brothers, and Ise Saburō have all fallen after magnificent fights. Kataoka and I are the only ones left. I desired to see you once more in this life. If you die before me, wait for me at Shide Mountain. If I am the first to go, I shall wait at the River of Three Ways."

5. A baggy piece of cloth that was sometimes suspended from the shoulders of a warrior's armor in order to deflect arrows coming from the rear.

"It is very hard to say good-bye like this. Long ago, we swore to die together, but if I go out with you I will not find a decent opponent. If I keep you here now that all the others have been killed, boors will humiliate me by intruding on my suicide. It cannot be helped. If I go first, I will wait at Shide Mountain. If you are first, promise to wait for me at the River of Three Ways. I have but a few lines more of this sutra to recite. Protect me with your life until I finish."

"I will do so." Benkei raised the blind and looked fixedly on his master's face, while tears constricted his throat. At the sound of enemy voices he took his leave and started off, but in a moment he returned to recite a verse.

Though one of us may die before the other, wait for me, my lord,  
where the road to hell branches off.

Since Benkei had alluded to the future in such a desperate hour, Yoshitsune responded:

Join me in the next world and the next,  
until we mount to paradise on a purple cloud.

At that Benkei wept aloud.

With their backs to each other Benkei and Kataoka charged, splitting the two-acre courtyard into two sectors while the besiegers retreated as one man. Kataoka attacked a group of seven warriors. When his shoulders and arms were limp with exhaustion and his body was covered with wounds, he ripped open his belly and died, as if in the knowledge that he could do no more. Benkei thereupon broke off a twelve-inch length from his halberd and threw it aside.

"This is more like it! Those worthless helpers got in my way!" he shouted, taking a bold stance. He advanced with his sword flashing, ripping open the bellies and knees of horses and dispensing with their unseated riders by slashing off their heads with the tip of his halberd or striking them down with the flat of his sword. Single-handed he checked the entire enemy host, not a man of whom dared meet him face to face. One could not even guess at the number of arrows lodged in his armor. He bent them and let them hang, for all the world like a straw raincoat wrong-side up, with their black, white, and colored feathers fluttering in the breeze even as *obana* reeds in an autumn gale on Musashi Moor.

With Benkei charging this way and that like a man possessed, the attackers were reduced to showering curses on his head. "How can it be that with enemies and friends dying on all sides, Benkei is the only one to survive, no matter how reckless he is? Not even his old exploits have prepared us for this. Since we can't defeat him, may our guardian gods strike him dead!" they begged.

The victorious Benkei, hearing this, planted his halberd upside down on the ground, rocking with laughter. He stood there like one of the two Guardian Kings.<sup>6</sup>

"See how that monk keeps looking over here! He's getting ready to attack. There's something uncanny about his laugh. Don't get near him unless you want to be killed," the besiegers warned one another.

After an interval during which none of the enemy ventured to approach, someone spoke up. "I have heard it said that heroes sometimes die on their feet. Let someone go up and take a look." None of his comrades volunteered, but just then a mounted warrior came galloping past and the swish of wind caught Benkei, who had indeed been dead for some time. As he fell, he seemed to lunge forward, gripping his halberd. "Look out, here he comes again!" the warriors cried, retreating hastily. Only after he had remained motionless on the ground for some minutes was there an unseemly rush to his side.

In time, people realized that Benkei had stood like a statue to protect his lord from intrusion while he was committing suicide.

[Translated by Helen McCullough]