



The Tale of Saigyo (Michigan Papers in Japanese Studies)

Saigyo

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The Tale of Saigyō a poetic biography of the late Heian poet Saigyō (1118-90), one of the most loved and respected poets in Japanese literary history. Its anonymous author followed the venerable "poem-tale" tradition by using 128 of Saigyō's finest and best-known poems and weaving around them facts and legends about the poet. The result is a biographical "journey" through his life. Saigyō moves from the life of a brilliant and favored young poet at the Heian imperial court, through a Buddhist "awakening" that leads him to cast off his worldly life and family ties and to transform himself into a wandering monk in search of salvation, through the vicissitudes of his long hard life on the road, to a final apotheosis as Buddhist saint in his famous death.

While The Tale of Saigyō is on one level the story of the making of a Buddhist saint, it is also a biography of the trials and sorrows of an idealized poetic sensibility during a tempestuous time that saw the death of the Heian period, the Genpei Wars, and the beginning of the turbulent Kamakura period. The moving portrait of the wandering poet-monk that emerges through this tale crystallized the image of Saigyō and is felt in such later literary figures as Bashō, who acknowledged Saigyō as his model and master.

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