



THE MAN WHO SANG TO GHOSTS
AARON SHEPARD

The Man Who Sang to Ghosts

A Japanese Legend

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"Hoichi!"

"Sir!" replied the young man. Then he added, "Please, sir, I am blind. I cannot see who you are."

"You have nothing to fear," said the voice. "My master, a lord of high rank, is lodging nearby. He came to visit Dan-no-ura, the scene of the famous battle. Now he hears of your talent in reciting the tale of the Heike. He wishes you to come at once to perform for himself and his attendants."

"I am most honored," said Hoichi.

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The Man Who Sang to Ghosts

A Japanese Legend
Retold from the Story of Hoichi and
Based on *The Tale of the Heike*

Aaron Shepard

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Cover art: Detail from “Uesugi Kenshin and the Blind Biwa Player,” a woodblock print by Yoshitoshi Tsukioka (1839–1892), portraying the bard Ishizaka Kengyo performing the story of Nue from *The Tale of the Heike* for a lord (not shown here) and his warriors.

Title page and chapter head graphic: Silhouette of a *bachi* (pick, plectrum) for the *biwa* (Japanese lute).

Ages 10 and up

Version 1.2

For Tadanori,
who risked his life
for a poem

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How to Say the Names

Akama	AH-ka-ma
biwa	BEE-wa
Dan-no-ura	DAH-no-OO-ra
Heike	HAY-kay
Hoichi	HO-ee-chee
samurai	SAH-moo-ri

The Man Who Sang to Ghosts



“Today’s battle is our last,” the commander-in-chief told the men on the ship’s deck. “Remember your honor and fight to the end. What more do we have to live for?”

And indeed it was their last.

No family in all Japan had held greater power than the Heike, or had risen to it so swiftly. But their fall had been even swifter. Chased from the capital city, they had been hounded for nearly two years. And now the remnant of the clan and its loyal samurai warriors were arrayed in boats and ships off the coast at Dan-no-ura, ready for their final stand against an enemy fleet.

As arrows flew and swords whirled, as dead and wounded samurai fell in the boats or dropped in the sea, the doom of the Heike grew clear. Then the clansmen, dressed in full armor, jumped into the waves, drowning themselves rather than fall into enemy hands.

One ship bore the child emperor and the court ladies. When the emperor's grandmother saw that the end was near, she took the emperor in her arms and declared, "Woman though I am, I will not let the enemy lay hands on me. I will go where the emperor must go."

"Where are you taking me, Grandmother?" asked the puzzled boy.

Fighting tears, she told him, "Away from this world of sorrow, to a happier one. Another capital lies beneath the waves."

And hugging him closely, she plunged into the sea.



The twanging notes of a *biwa* drifted over the temple garden in the hot summer night.

Sitting cross-legged on the veranda, softly plucking the strings of the lute, was a blind young man named Hoichi. He was dressed in the robe of a Buddhist priest, and his head was shaved like one—but he was not a priest. He was a bard, one of the many blind bards who for centuries had kept alive the tale of the Heike.

Sometime around midnight, unable to sleep in the heat, Hoichi had come out in the evening air, with his *biwa* to keep him company. As he played, he thought about the weeks since his coming to live at the temple at Akama. How lucky he was that the priest had invited him! As talented as Hoichi was, he was just starting his career. So he was grateful he no longer had to worry about food or lodging.

Then too there was the honor and thrill of residing in a temple so closely linked to the Heike. Dan-no-ura, the place of their final battle, was just at the edge of

town. And it was to appease the restless Heike spirits that the townspeople had built this temple, along with a cemetery nearby, where the priest held services in front of Heike memorial tombs. As for the spirits themselves, they no longer caused too much trouble. But they still showed themselves on dark nights, appearing as small, ghostly flames that hovered over sea and sand. “Demon-fires,” they were called.

Hoichi’s old teacher had told him, “To perform the tale of the Heike, you must know the Heike well.” And where better to come to know them than the temple at Akama?

Hearing something, Hoichi stopped his playing and listened. Through the night came footsteps, measured by a steady *clank, clank*—the sound of armor.

A samurai coming to the temple, thought Hoichi. What could he want at this hour?

The footsteps moved through the back gate of the temple and across the garden. *Clank, clank*. They were coming straight toward him! As the young man’s heart beat faster, the footsteps halted before the veranda.

“Hoichi!”

“Sir!” replied the young man. Then he added, “Please, sir, I am blind. I cannot see who you are.”

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hears of your talent in reciting the tale of the Heike. He wishes you to come at once to perform for himself and his attendants.”

“I am most honored,” said Hoichi.

The young man slung his biwa on his back and slipped into his straw sandals. Then his arm was clasped in a grip of iron, and he was led rapidly away.

They started down the road to town, then turned toward the shore. *Where could we be going?* thought Hoichi. *A great lord cannot stay on the beach!*

But before they reached the beach they stopped, and the samurai called “Open!” The young man heard the sounds of a large double-door gate swinging wide. *How strange,* thought Hoichi. *I know nothing of a great house here.*

They crossed a large yard, mounted some steps, removed their sandals, and passed through another door. Then Hoichi was led down long walkways of polished wooden floors, around many corners, and across wide rooms carpeted with straw matting.

At last they entered what Hoichi could tell was a huge room filled by a great company. Silk robes rustled like leaves in a forest, and the air hummed with a multitude of soft voices.

Hoichi was led forward to a cushion on the floor, and the iron grip withdrew from his arm. The young man

kneeled and set down his biwa, then bowed to the lord he knew must be seated before him.

“Hoichi.” The stern voice of an old woman came from slightly to the left. The rest of the room fell silent. “You will now recite for us the tale of the Heike.”

“It is my honor,” said Hoichi, bowing again. “But the tale of the Heike takes many nights to perform in full. Which portion do you wish to hear tonight?”

There was a pause, and Hoichi sensed a tension in the room. Then a man’s deep voice came from slightly to the right.

“Recite the tale of the Battle of Dan-no-ura. Of all tales, it is the most poignant.”

Hoichi bowed once more, sat cross-legged, took up his biwa, and tuned it. Then taking his large pick made of horn, he began to play.

Never had Hoichi played better than before this great company. In the tones of his biwa were the roar of the sea, the whistling of arrows, the crashing of boats, the clanking of armor, the clanging of swords, the cries of fierce warriors.

And then Hoichi’s voice lifted in chant. He sang of the gathering of forces at the scene of battle, the formal first exchange of arrows, the words of the commander-in-chief. He sang of the initial advances of the Heike, still hopeful, then the turning of the tide against them and the desertion of many supporters. He sang of the

Heike clansmen holding fast to extra armor, even boat anchors, to speed their journey to the bottom of the sea.

At first the listeners were quiet, almost unnaturally so. But as the performance went on, they seemed to grow restless, anxious. Hoichi heard little exclamations, sounds of men weeping. *Never have I affected an audience so deeply*, thought Hoichi proudly. Encouraged by this, he performed even more brilliantly, even more movingly.

But as he began to sing of the emperor's grandmother—her taking the boy in her arms, the words she spoke to him—the cries and weeping grew louder, until Hoichi became uneasy. And when he sang of their leap into the waters, the company burst out in such wild wailing that Hoichi was frightened.

What has aroused them so? he wondered. *Can my performance alone have done this?*

Hoichi finished, and the noise in the room slowly subsided. Somewhere in front, a boy's quiet whimpering faded away.

"Hoichi," said the old woman, "we had heard high praise for your playing and reciting. But never did we imagine such skill as you have displayed. Our lord will remain here two more nights. You must come each night at the same hour and perform the tale again. And be assured, on the last night you will be well rewarded."

"Thank you!" said Hoichi, bowing again.

“But be warned,” continued the woman. “Our lord does not wish his presence here known. Tell no one of your coming!”

The iron grip fell again on Hoichi’s arm and led him quickly back the way he had come.



No one had seen Hoichi leave the temple. But the priest, returning after midnight from a service he had held, happened to enter by the back gate, and he noticed that Hoichi's sandals were gone from the veranda steps. Checking inside, he found that the young man was not in his room.

Where could he be, so late? he wondered.

The next morning, when the priest rose, he checked again, and found Hoichi on his sleeping mat, deep asleep. Hours later, a servant reported that the young man was up at last, and the priest sent for him.

"Hoichi, you've worried me. You were out very late, and none of the servants knows anything about it. Why would you go out like that on your own?"

"It was nothing," said Hoichi. "Just a little business I had to attend to. Please don't concern yourself."

But the young man's answer worried the priest still more. It was not like Hoichi to be secretive.

Later he told one of the servants, “Keep a lookout tonight. If Hoichi leaves again, follow and see where he goes.”



That night, the servant kept watch on Hoichi's room from a far corner of the garden. Clouds covered the moon, and it began to drizzle. The servant huddled under a tree, but the rain grew heavier.

"It's almost midnight," grumbled the man. "He won't leave so late, and not in this rain! I'm going to bed."

But just then he saw Hoichi come out of his room with his biwa and sit on the covered veranda. "What's he up to?" mumbled the servant.

Hoichi sat for a long time, softly playing the biwa. Then he stopped and seemed to listen to something. All at once, he stiffened and called out, "Sir!"

The puzzled servant looked around. "Who does he think he's talking to?"

He saw Hoichi rise, sling his biwa on his back, slip into his sandals, and come down the steps. The young man did not even seem to notice the rain. Walking more briskly than a blind man should, he crossed the garden and passed through the gate.

The servant rushed inside and grabbed a lantern. But by the time he got out to the road, Hoichi was already out of sight. The rain was now falling in sheets.

“Hoichi! Hoichi!” He hurried toward town, expecting to catch up any minute. But he didn’t see a soul.

“How could he move so quickly? I’d better find him, or the priest will be furious!”

The servant reached town still without seeing Hoichi. He knocked on the doors of every house and establishment he could remember the young man visiting. But all he got for his efforts were the curses of those he awakened.

“It’s no use,” he told himself. “I’ve tried everywhere.”

He started back to the temple, walking this time by way of the shore. But then, amid the howling of the wind and the beating of the rain, he heard the tones of a biwa and a voice raised in chant.

“It’s him!” he cried, and he hurried toward the sounds. . . .



Once more Hoichi sat in the great hall. Once more his biwa and his voice brought to life the Battle of Dan-no-ura. Once more came the little outbursts, the sounds of weeping, growing louder, more anguished, more fervent, until . . .

“Hoichi!”

What’s this? thought Hoichi. *It sounds like one of the temple servants! But what is he doing here? And how could he think of interrupting me like that?*

Hoichi kept playing, kept singing. The emperor’s grandmother, taking the boy in her arms, stepping to the edge of the ship . . .

“Hoichi! Hoichi!”

The voice was in his ear, and a hand was on his shoulder, shaking him.

The listeners in the room had grown strangely quiet. Hoichi kept playing his biwa, but said in a low, desperate voice, “Are you out of your mind? I am performing

for this noble company. Go away, or you will bring disaster on us both!”

“Hoichi, you are bewitched! There is no noble company. You are sitting in the rain, here in the cemetery of the Heike. In front of you are the memorial tombs of the emperor, his grandmother, and the commander-in-chief. And all around you are hundreds of demon-fires!”

“What are you talking about?” said Hoichi. “I am in a palace, performing for a great lord!”

The servant did not argue further. Much bigger than Hoichi, he slipped an arm across the young man’s chest and hauled him off the muddy ground.

“Stop!” cried Hoichi, struggling against the grasp. “Please! Leave me alone! You’ll ruin everything!”

Ignoring both pleading and struggling, the servant dragged him toward the cemetery gate.



The priest looked with concern on the pale, downcast figure before him.

“Hoichi, I’m glad you have finally trusted me enough to explain yourself. And I hope you now understand that it was not for a great lord you performed the tale of the Heike, but for the spirits of the Heike themselves.”

“I understand,” said Hoichi softly.

“Good,” said the priest. “Then you should also understand that the only ‘reward’ they would give you would be to tear your body to pieces—to give you the ‘honor’ of joining them forever. You are in great danger, my friend. The samurai will surely come again this third night. And if you go with him this time, you will not return.”

The young man trembled.

“None of us here,” said the priest, “could oppose this ghostly warrior. But I have thought of a way to save you. To make it work, you’ll need great courage and strength of will. Are you willing to try?”

“I am,” said Hoichi.

On the priest’s request, the young man stripped off his clothes. Then the priest took a brush and ink and began to write on Hoichi’s body.

“I am inscribing on you a passage from sacred scripture. When the holy text covers every part of your body—from the top of your head to the soles of your feet—you will be invisible to the spirits. Tonight, when the samurai calls you, sit still and do not make a sound. He will not be able to find you. When he leaves without you, you’ll be free from danger for good.”

At last the priest finished writing. “I’m afraid I now have a duty I cannot avoid. I must hurry out to hold a service in a nearby village, and I won’t be back till very late. But if you do just as I have told you, you’ll be perfectly safe. Good luck, my friend.”



That night, a little before midnight, Hoichi stepped from his room and sat on the veranda. His biwa lay in his lap, but he did not play it. He sat still, trying to calm the beat of his heart.

At last he heard it—*clank, clank*. Through the back gate—*clank, clank*. Across the garden—*clank, clank*. Before the veranda—*clank*.

“Hoichi!”

The young man caught at his breath and forced himself not to reply.

“Hoichi!!”

He tried to stop shaking.

“Hoichi!!!”

His hands clenched, as he willed himself not to faint.

“Hm,” said the voice in front of him. “I see the biwa. But of the bard I see nothing.”

The footsteps moved onto the veranda and circled partway around him.

“Nothing, that is, except two ears.”

Two ears? How can he see my ears?

The steps moved directly behind him. “A bard with no hands or mouth will hardly serve my lord. Still, I must show I have followed orders as best I can. I had better take the ears.”

Hoichi froze in terror. He felt two hands clamp his ears in an iron grip and . . .



Later that night, the priest returned from the nearby village. Anxious to check on Hoichi, he entered by the back gate and crossed the garden. Then he stopped in horror.

“Hoichi!” he cried. He rushed to the veranda. “My dear friend, what have they done?”

There lay Hoichi, still and silent, his head resting in a pool of blood.

The young man was alive, but barely. The priest himself bandaged the wounds and sat all night by Hoichi’s mat.

It was late morning before Hoichi stirred. Almost at once, he reached up to the sides of his head and touched the cloth that was wound over and around.

The eyes of the priest filled with tears. “My friend, I’m so sorry. It was all my fault, my terrible, terrible fault. I thought I had covered your body completely with the sacred writing. But in my haste to leave, *I forgot to write on your ears!*”



Hoichi recovered, and as time went on, prospered as well. Word of his adventure spread, and many curious lords and ladies traveled great distances to hear him play and recite. So he gained both fame and wealth.

What's more, Hoichi's encounter gave his performance a depth achieved by few others. For, as his teacher had told him, "To perform the tale of the Heike, you must know the Heike well."

And who would care to know them better than the man called Hoichi the Earless?

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About the Story

The Tale of the Heike is a chronicle of the twelfth-century rise and fall of the Heike clan, climaxing in the Battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185. This chronicle is considered one of the two greatest Japanese literary works, and the most influential of all. Scenes and characters from the work have appeared in novels, stories, songs, classical theater, puppet plays, storytelling texts, movies, and television shows.

The work in its earliest form was created in the early thirteenth century, possibly by a retired court scholar named Yukinaga. Composed in poetic prose rather than verse, it was originally intended as written literature, but it was quickly embraced by the blind bards of Japan. These bards were called *biwa hoshi* (BEE-wuh HO-shee), “lute priests,” because they dressed in the robes of Buddhist priests and accompanied themselves on the four-stringed Japanese lute called *biwa*.

In the hands of the *biwa hoshi*, *The Tale of the Heike* was adapted for oral performance, and much material was added. A standardized version was finally dictated in 1371 by the great bard Kakuichi. For a century after that, *biwa hoshi* recital of *The Tale of the Heike* was

considered the highest of all Japanese performing arts. It remained popular up to the early twentieth century, and a few biwa hoshi still perform today.

The legend of Hoichi is retold here chiefly from “The Story of Mimi-nashi-Hoichi,” a retelling by the great literary pioneer Lafcadio Hearn in his *Kwaidan* (“*Ghost Story*”), Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1904. Though Hearn does not cite his source, it was apparently a literary work rather than a folktale—though there may have been a folk source farther back. The legend is well known throughout Japan.

I have used elements from *The Tale of the Heike* to supplement Hearn’s version, and in some cases to correct it. Hearn, for instance, states that all the Heike died at Dan-no-ura. But *The Tale of the Heike* relates that a few clansmen were captured and executed later, and many male children were not at Dan-no-ura at all, but were only later hunted down and killed. Not all the Heike women were at Dan-no-ura either, and of those who were, all but the emperor’s grandmother were captured and escorted safely back to the capital. A samurai would not attack a lady.

Another interesting disparity is in the concept of the afterlife. The metaphysics of *The Tale of the Heike* are strictly Buddhist, specifically of the Pure Land sect. By that doctrine, the dying Heike would have passed at once to a Buddhist paradise. The concept of lingering

spirits who must be placated belongs rather to Shinto, the great rival of Buddhism in Japan. But this concept is of course central to the tale, so I have not tampered with it.

Akama—the scene of the story—is an old name for what is today the city of Shimonoseki. It lies on the southwest tip of Honshu, the main island of Japan. Dan-no-ura is a bay at the east end of town. The Battle of Dan-no-ura actually took place throughout much of the Shimonoseki Strait, the narrow channel between the islands of Honshu and Kyushu.

Two good contemporary translations of *The Tale of the Heike* are by Helen Craig McCullough, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1988; and Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce Tsuchida, University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo, 1975. Additional background information on the biwa hoshi is found in *The Legend of Semimaru, Blind Musician of Japan*, by Susan Matisoff, Columbia University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1978; and *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*, by Makoto Ueda, Western Reserve University Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 1967, chapter 8.

The advice here attributed to Hoichi's teacher is actually from Jigu in his *Saikai Yoteki Shu* ("The Remnants from the Western Sea"), a seventeenth-century treatise on the art of the biwa hoshi.

For a special treat, see the award-winning movie *Kwaidan*, directed by Masaki Kobayashi, Janus Films, 1964. It features four stories from Hearn's book, including the legend of Hoichi. The dramatization includes a stylized enactment of the Battle of Dan-no-ura, accompanied by the performance of a real-life biwa hoshi!

My thanks to storyteller Grace Megumi Fleming for her help on the cultural details in this story.

Aaron Shepard

Aaron Shepard is the award-winning author of *The Baker's Dozen*, *The Sea King's Daughter*, *Lady White Snake*, and many more books for young people. His stories have appeared often in *Cricket* magazine, while his Web site is known internationally as a prime resource for folktales, storytelling, and reader's theater. Once a professional storyteller, Aaron specializes in lively retellings of folktales and other traditional literature, which have won him honors from the American Library Association, the New York Public Library, the Bank Street College of Education, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the American Folklore Society. Visit him at **www.aaronshep.com**.