CHAPTER TWO

HITOMARO IN HEIAN TEXTS: A SAGE OF POETRY

Following a period of intense enthusiasm in the eighth century for Chinese genres, the Heian period (794–1185) saw the rise of Japanese poetry to a canonical status comparable to that of poetry in Chinese (kanshi). The decisive development in this process was the compilation of the first imperially commissioned anthology (chokusenshū) of Japanese poetry, the Kokinshū, in the early tenth century. The Kokinshū was initially legitimized as a poetic authority by its imperial commission, and its status as a repository of poetic norms was confirmed by its canonization as such by Fujiwara no Shunzei in the late twelfth century. Its compilation was not only a crucial development in Japanese court poetry, but also an event of paramount importance for the canonization of Hitomaro. In addition to poetry, the Kokinshū includes prose prefaces (one in Japanese, one in Chinese) which set out in some detail the illustrious history and essential qualities of Japanese poetry. The Japanese or Kana Preface (Kanajo) in particular was canonized as the founding text of Japanese poetic theory and criticism, and Hitomaro is lionized therein as a “sage of poetry” (uta no hijiri), a quasi-supernatural figure presented as the representative poet of a glorious—but only vaguely defined—past age. As described in the previous chapter, Hitomaro had been similarly singled out as an ancestral poetic figure by Ōtomo no Yakamochi in the Man'yōshū (as part of the “Gate of the Mountain Persimmon”), but it was his treatment as such in the prestigious Kokinshū (as opposed to the less canonical Man'yōshū) that cemented his place at the apex of the court-poetic tradition. This identification of Hitomaro as a special category of poet, a “sage of poetry,” was the first important development in his canonization in the Heian period; the second was the Hitomaro eigu (portrait-offering) ceremony in 1118, which will be discussed in the next chapter and which was instrumental in Hitomaro’s transition from a sage to a deity of poetry.

The Kokinshū was not the only Heian-period text to figure prominently in Hitomaro’s canonization, though it was by far the most significant; indeed the Kokinshū is probably the single most influential text in the entire history of Hitomaro’s reception. Other poetic texts, both public
and private, also had important roles to play in developing Hitomaro’s image in the Heian period. Significant editorial attention is paid to Hitomaro in the third imperially commissioned poetry anthology, *Shūiwa* (Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poetry, 1007), in which he is presented as a traveler and exile. This can be seen as a continuation of Hitomaro’s treatment in the *Man’yōshū*, but may also be understood in the context of poems composed by envoys to the continent and in relation to the archetypal narrative of “the exiled noble” (*kishu ryūritan*), a trope which is found in prominent Heian texts such as *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji) and *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise). In a further parallel with the protagonists of these texts—particularly *Ise monogatari*—it has also been argued that Hitomaro is presented as a gifted lover as well as a gifted poet in the *Shūishū* through the selection of love poems attributed to him there. In addition, the early Heian Period saw Hitomaro canonized as one of a group of outstanding poets, the so-called “Thirty-Six Poetic Immortals” (*sanjūrokkasen*) first gathered together by the prominent poet and critic Fujiwara no Kintō (966–1041) in his collection of exemplary poems and poets, *Sanjūrokumin* (Selection of Thirty-Six Persons, 1009–1012).

*Hitomaro in the Kokinshū prefaces*

We see in the careful construction of the Iwami *sōmonka* and *banka* sequences of the *Man’yōshū* the fascination that Hitomaro held for the compiler or compilers of volumes I and II of that anthology. Hitomaro’s recognition by later *Man’yōshū* poets is indicated implicitly by the placement of poems from his putative personal collection and explicitly by Ōtomo no Yakamochi in his reference to the “gate of the mountain persimmon.” In the *Kokinshū*, however, Hitomaro is no longer merely an object of fascination or respect but one of reverence, accorded a semi-divine status. Hitomaro makes his first appearance in the *Kokinshū* in its Kana Preface, where he is described in glowing terms as holding high court rank and being in close attendance on the emperor. Here we see a further development of the trend set in the legendary version of Hitomaro’s death described in the Iwami *banka*, in which Hitomaro’s constructed image becomes detached from the poems most definitely ascribed to him: the Hitomaro of the *Kokinshū* is no longer directly dependent on or supported by the poems which bear his name, but has become an autonomous image, a semi-divine poetic figure whose