or even by the Emperor himself; real power resided elsewhere.

Though Michizane’s style of life differed diametrically from that of Japan’s military heroes, the pattern of his failure was remarkably similar. By doggedly supporting a losing cause, he proved his moral sincerity. Furthermore, the cause that he espoused represented no political innovation or wave of the future; for it was in order to turn things back to the period before the Fujiwaras intruded on the scene—to that pristine period when (or so it was believed) the emperors ruled as well as reigned—that Emperor Uda had tried to use Michizane’s talents as a statesman. It is significant, too, that Michizane’s best-known writing should be, not the impressive tomes produced at the height of his career, but poignant, simple verses, like the farewell poem to his plum tree, that he composed during his last years in Kyushu when he had been disgraced by the new Emperor and apparently abandoned by his old friend, Uda—poetry of a kind that almost invariably confirms the sincerity and emotional appeal of the failed hero. Finally, the turpitude of Fujiwara no Tokihira, as established by the legend in utter disregard of the facts, belongs to the stock characterization of the successful survivors who “have their reward” in terms of worldly success but who traditionally serve as foils in the Japanese heroic scheme.

Victory Through Defeat

Minamoto no Yoshitsune, who after a series of brilliant military victories spent his last years as a fugitive implacably hounded by his elder brother until he was forced to commit harakiri at the age of thirty, is the perfect exemplar of heroic failure. If he had not actually existed, the Japanese might have been obliged to invent him. Indeed, much of our knowledge about this spectacular young man is invention, a rich fabric of tales and legends woven during the course of the centuries to embellish the sparse historical facts of his career and to create Japan’s quintessential hero.

Though Yoshitsune made not the slightest contribution to the advancement of society or culture, he is one of the most illustrious and beloved personalities in Japanese history. Even in the 1970s, when samurai ideals are in eclipse, his story is relished by schoolchildren, and the peculiar poignancy of his downfall evokes an immediate response from people of every age.

Yoshitsune’s historical fame is due mainly to his military achievements; but the real reason for his lasting popularity as a hero is that his brief career was shaped in a dramatic parabola of the type that most appeals to the Japanese imagination: after suddenly soaring to success he was undone at the very height of his glory and plummeted to total disaster, a victim of his own sincerity, outwitted by men more worldly and politic than himself and betrayed by those whom he had trusted. So faithfully does Yoshitsune conform to the ideal of heroism through failure that the term hōganbiki (which literally meant “sympathy with the Lieutenant” and came from his rank in the Imperial Police) has become fixed in the language to describe the traditional sym-
pathy with the losing side. By contrast his elder brother, Minamoto no Yoritomo, who happens to have been one of the most important leaders in Japanese history, paid for his worldly success by being relegated to the background of the legend, where he hovers murky as a suspicious, vindictive character consumed with envy of the resplendent hero whom he ruthlessly pursues and destroys.

The two brothers belong to a decisive turning point in history when Japan was moving from the old Court-dominated government to a feudal society under the control of a military shogunate—a system that lasted in one form or another until the “opening” to the West seven centuries later. It is no coincidence that the most popular of all Japanese heroes should have lived out his short, tragic career during this seminal period.

Modern Japanese historians are at pains to clear away the tangle of legends on which almost all the subsequent literature about Yoshitsune is based and to concentrate on the scant documentary material that can be accurately verified. For the first twenty-one years of his life there is nothing authentic whatsoever, the factual vacuum being filled by a mass of fanciful tales and legends. Concerning the last four years we know the bare historical events, but the rest is embroidery or outright fiction. This means that we have verifiable data for a mere five years of the hero’s life, from 1180 when he joined Yoritomo’s forces in preparation for the campaign against the Tairas until 1185 when he fled the capital and became an outlaw, having narrowly escaped assassination by one of his brother’s henchmen.

This is a parlous state of ignorance for any historical work, but it is far from being an obstacle in the present study. Just as dreams, fantasies, and inventions often tell us more about an individual than the objective events of his life, so for the mystique of the failed hero, myth and legend are at least as important as hard facts.

In the vast literature that recounts the story of Yoshitsune, the most famous source for the successful, military part of his life is the magnificent thirteenth-century epic known as “The Tales of the Tairas” (Heike Monogatari). These stories were spread throughout the country by minstrels, who accompanied their recitation with lute music. They reach their climax in the description of the three famous battles that brought the Taira clan to its ruin and established Yoshitsune as the greatest general in Japan. The most detailed source for the Yoshitsune cycle of legends, however, is “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune” (Gikeki), which was written some two hundred and fifty years after the events, and which records all the important stories that had accumulated about the hero during the intervening centuries. By the time that this anonymous work was compiled the Yoshitsune legend, with its focus on the hero’s tragic downfall, had already taken firm shape; and it is significant that “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune,” though ostensibly covering his entire life, devotes only a few sentences to the military victories and concentrates overwhelmingly on his years as a fugitive. In “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune” the character of Benkei, the outrageous, swashbuckling priest who adheres to Yoshitsune throughout his misfortunes, emerges as a central figure and increasingly takes the lead in the action while his master grows gradually more passive, melancholy, and resigned to disaster. Both “The Tales of the Tairas” and “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune” provided inspiration and detail for a vast literature, including popular tales, dramatic dances, No, puppet, and Kabuki plays.

The only definite date in Yoshitsune’s early life is that of his birth, 1159. This was a memorable year in Japanese history; for it ended with the first outbreak of open violence between the two chief military clans, the Tairas and the Minamotos. The power structure in Japan was in a process of fundamental change. By the beginning of the twelfth century the Court aristocracy under the prepotent Fujiwara clan had long since wrested every vestige of real control from the theoretically supreme emperors; such powers as the imperial family retained were exercised mainly by the Retired Emperor (In), who had his own private governmental offices, independent both of the official imperial bureaucracy and of the well-entrenched Fujiwara administration.

The late Heian system of government, cumbersome and inefficient though it was, looked as if it might lumber along by sheer inertia when suddenly in 1156 a brief explosion of violence, in which opposing Court factions unwisely enlisted the support of different military leaders, revealed that the entire structure of aristocratic rule was an anachronism. For all real power in the land had rapidly been passing to the samurai, those despised, boorish warriors whom the noblemen had for centuries used as
their lackeys to settle land disputes and to keep order in the provinces and the capital, but whose leaders were now determined and ready to take affairs into their own hands. Though the emperors were still regarded as the ultimate source of authority owing to their religious charisma as direct descendants of the sun goddess, and though members of the Fujiwara clan still kept an important position in the microcosm of the Court, such effective government as Japan might have would henceforth be directed by the class that during the past century had acquired by far the strongest force in the country and whose economic base was secured by its control of vast estates of rice land.

During the twelfth century the Court aristocracy had finally proved itself incapable of providing even a minimum of practical control and administration, not only in the unruly eastern territories but even in the home provinces and the capital city itself. While the military leaders were prepared to leave them with the trappings of prestige and to recognize the imperial family as the moral source of political power, there could be no question that a new era had started in Japanese history and that all important decisions would now be made by leaders of the samurai class, who alone had the power to enforce them.

The vital question that remained was which of the two main military clans would exercise power in the Emperor’s name, or (in more personal terms) whether the dominant figure in the new period would be Yoshitomo, the leader of the Minamoto clan which was concentrated in the eastern plain (near present-day Tokyo), or Kiyomori, the clan chieftain of the Taira whose main strength was in the home provinces to the west. Both clans were descended in collateral line from early Heian emperors, and this noble lineage was essential for their prestige; but during the past two centuries, while they had consolidated power in their respective provinces and formed a new society based on a feudal type of relationship between lord and vassals, they had dissociated themselves increasingly from the patterns of Heian Court life and developed a specifically military ethos that was almost diametrically opposed to everything represented by the world of The Tale of Genji. This new ethos, which came to be known as the “way of the bow and horse,” was best exemplified by the eastern Minamotos, who both geographically and psychologically were far more distant from the capital than the Taira and less susceptible to the supposedly enervating influence of the Imperial Court. Yet in the fierce clash of 1159 it was the Taira who triumphed decisively; and during the next quarter of a century it was Kiyomori and his family who from their headquarters in Kyoto exercised supreme rule in the Emperor’s name.

Predictably enough—for the gentle mores of Heian were one of the first niceties to be sacrificed in this new, harsh age—Kiyomori’s victory was followed by a series of killings and executions, in which the Taira summarily disposed of their enemies and potential opponents. Yoshitomo, the chieftain of the Minamotos, had been treacherously slaughtered in his bath by one of his own retainers (the constant harping on loyalty in Japanese military treatises no doubt reflects the frequency of such lapses), and shortly afterwards his eldest son was captured and decapitated in the busy execution grounds of the Kamo River.

Taira no Kiyomori was not noted for his merciful disposition; yet for some unknown reason most of Yoshitomo’s numerous sons were spared in the sanguinary aftermath of the Minamoto catastrophe. Of these the most famous were the senior survivor, Yoritomo, who was a lad of thirteen at the time of his father’s assassination, and Yoshitsune, a mere infant less than one year old. Yoritomo was banished to an eastern province and put under the guard of two important vassals, Yoshitsune had been brought to the capital by his mother and, according to tradition, the first years of his life were spent with Kiyomori’s own family. This act of magnanimity turned out to be fatal for the Taira, since these two boys lived to compass the ruin of their clan. On his deathbed some twenty years later, Kiyomori’s last request was that no Buddhist services be held for him but that someone promptly slay Yoritomo and cut off his head and lay it before his tomb—an empty wish, for the Minamotos were already in full resurgence and it was too late for simple solutions.

Yoshitsune, the ninth and last son of Minamoto no Yoshitomo, was far lower in the social hierarchy than his half-brother, Yoritomo, and this was no doubt an important factor in their subsequent relationship, since Yoritomo was never prepared to regard him as an equal. Lady Tokiwa, Yoshitsune’s mother, was a minor lady-in-waiting at Court. She was a woman of outstanding beauty, and when Kiyomori met her after his victory he was so charmed that he made her his concubine and agreed to spare the life of her three young children. This story
is no doubt apocryphal, but it is true that, while most of Yoshitomo's adherents were being eliminated, Yoshitsune and his mother were allowed to remain safely in the capital and that subsequently she was remarried to a Fujiwara courtier.

As part of his condition for granting mercy, Kiyomori specified that Yoshitomo's three youngest boys should be trained as Buddhist novices—an absurdly naïve precaution as it turned out—and at the age of six Yoshitsune was sent for religious training to Kurama Temple in the wild, mountainous region north of Kyoto. Everything was done to imbue him with a peaceful nature suitable to a priest, but, according to tradition, he would regularly sneak out of the temple and learn the use of arms from a mysterious mountain hermit. The youthful Yoshitsune was virtually an orphan. He is pictured as a "wild child," untamed, solitary, and independent, with a great fondness for wanderings and adventures; and, though he lived in a temple as an acolyte, he obstinately resisted the discipline of monastic life and refused to let his head be shaved. Already we detect the lineaments of the future outlaw who was unable to submit to the control of his elder brother, the representative of established authority. Meanwhile Yoritomo, exiled to his distant eastern province under a mild form of house arrest, was leading a relatively settled, disciplined existence and impressing his guardians by his intelligence and rapid advancement. The contrast in character and style of life between the two half-brothers, the eldest and the youngest of Yoshitomo's sons, is established from the outset.

One of the most famous stories in the Yoshitsune legend belongs to these early years. It describes a warrior monk, a great menacing mountain of a man, who has boasted that he will rob one thousand passerby of their swords so that he may contribute to the rebuilding of a temple. Having succeeded in stealing nine hundred and ninety-nine weapons, he posts himself one night by a bridge in Kyoto and is waiting for his final victim when he sees a slender young figure approaching alone in the dark. The youth is nonchalantly playing a flute and wears a silk cloak over his head and shoulders in a style common among temple acolytes. The monk first refuses to regard this effeminate stripping as a worthy opponent, but when they start fighting it becomes clear that Yoshitsune's secret lessons in the mountains have made him invincible. According to one version, Yoshitsune ends the final bout in a great triumph of skill over brawn when he discards his sword and downs the gargantuan monk with his fan. Overawed by this display of virtuosity (a typical example of the hero's life as being a "pageant of marvels"), the monk offers to remain with the lad as his sworn retainer. He is Benkei, who becomes prominent in the later, "downhill" part of Yoshitsune's career as his most loyal supporter.

At the age of ten Yoshitsune happened to come upon a genealogy of the Minamoto clan and thus discovered his true identity. From then he was consumed with desire to fight the Taira and avenge his father's defeat; fixed in this objective, he avoided taking the final Buddhist vows and pursued his military exercises with redoubled energy. Unlike Yoritomo, for whom the conquest of the Taira was mainly a preliminary to establishing a strong military government in the east under Minamoto rule, Yoshitsune is shown from his early years as having been motivated by a moral imperative to defeat the enemies who had humiliated his clan.

Some five years later Yoshitsune, assisted by a visiting gold merchant, finally managed to escape from the temple and from the surveillance of his Taira enemies. After many adventures and narrow escapes he made his way to Oshū, a remote territory in the northeastern part of the main island where for several generations the so-called "northern Fujiwaras" (a distant branch of the great Court family) had been established as virtually independent rulers, secure in their vast wealth and military power. Hidehira, their clan leader, offered the young man his protection, and he remained for about five years, safe from pursuit by Taira troops. It is said that on his way to the north, Yoshitsune stopped at a post station for his coming-of-age ceremony. Since no members of his family were present to officiate, he was obliged to perform the solemn ritual himself. The anecdote serves, of course, to emphasize the solitary nature of the young hero.

According to tradition, one of the reasons that Yoshitsune enjoyed so much freedom during his years in the mountain temple was that his guardians underestimated him because of his slight build and girlish looks and never suspected the lion that lurked beneath the frail exterior. His physical appearance, which is well established in the legendary accounts, may surprise Western readers, who are accustomed to somewhat sturdier heroes. "The Tales of the Taira" picture him as "a little man with a fair complexion." From some of the descriptions it appears that the
natural pallor of his skin was enhanced by the use of white powder, a common custom among Heian aristocrats like Prince Genji but rather incongruous for a Minamoto warrior. In later accounts Yoshitsune appears as an etiolated youth with beautiful, feminine features; and the contrast between this delicate exterior and his powerful masculinity, as revealed in his military prowess and active amorous life, is part of the hero's peculiar fascination. Gempei Seiki ("The Chronicle of the Rise and Fall of the Minamotos and the Tairas"), a detailed history of the struggle between the clans, gives perhaps the most reliable and unglamourous picture of Yoshitsune when it describes him as he joined Yoritomo's forces in the east to prepare for their all-out rebellion against the Tairas: "a small, pale youth with crooked teeth and bulging eyes."

Now at the age of twenty-one this unlikely candidate for heroism embarked on his brief career as a soldier, which in a mere five years was to establish him as a prodigy. It is typical of the ironies that studded Yoshitsune's life that in his first campaign the enemy should have been not the hated Tairas but his own cousin Yoshinaka, one of the most illustrious fighters in Japan, whom he attacked on the orders of his elder brother and defeated with spectacular success.

Yoshinaka's brief, brilliant career in many ways adumbrates that of Yoshitsune himself. After a meteoric rise to fame when he led his fierce mountain forces in the first major victories against the Tairas, Yoshinaka incurred the suspicion and displeasure of Yoritomo; this was partly because of the unruly behaviour of his troops in Kyoto, but the underlying reason was his own independent attitude and unwillingness to submit to higher authority. Yoritomo ordered that he be "chastised" (the standard euphemism of the time) and, with typical disregard for clan solidarity, used his younger brother for the job. The dramatic nature of Yoshinaka's downfall confirmed his status as one of the heroes of the age; but his rough nature and the unreasonableness of his soldiery in the capital lowered him in popular esteem and provided a degree of justification for Yoritomo's decision to destroy him—a justification that never applied in the case of Yoshitsune, who was noted for his merciful treatment of the civilian population.

Having established his credentials as a commander, Yoshitsune was eager to follow up his success by attacking the real
enemy. His opportunity came only one month later when he decisively defeated the Tairas at Ichinotani by the shores of the Inland Sea. The outcome of this famous battle was decided by a surprise attack in which Yoshitsune led a small body of cavalry down a precipitous mountain path (so steep, it is said, that even the local monkeys did not dare descend it) and attacked the enemy encampment from the rear, totally demoralizing the Taira forces and obliging them to flee to the island of Shikoku. This manoeuvre was typical of Yoshitsune’s tactics, which were marked by panache, speed, and an uncanny ability to gauge the enemy’s reactions. As part of these tactics he was prepared to take considerable risks and did not hesitate to override his fellow commanders who preferred a slower approach. The invariable success of his manoeuvres was bound to irk more cautious colleagues and to arouse their jealousy, and this was no doubt one reason for the damaging reports which Yoritomo, ensconced in his distant eastern headquarters, now began to receive about his headstrong young brother.

Elated by his success at Ichinotani, Yoshitsune hoped to pursue the fight before the Tairas had time to recover, but Yoritomo’s suspicions had already been aroused. Despite Yoshitsune’s predominant role in the first great victory over the Tairas, the main honour went to Noriyori, an ineffectual but obedient half-brother, who was now despatched as commanding general of his forces in the west. Yoshitsune was obliged to linger in the capital, and had to wait an entire year for his next opportunity to attack the Tairas. Once again he depended on surprise tactics: braving a fierce typhoon, he crossed the Inland Sea with a small body of troops and, by a brilliant and rapid manoeuvre, routed the vastly superior Taira forces who were entrenched in Yashima on the island of Shikoku. About one month later, on 25th April 1185, he dealt the Tairas a final, staggering blow at the great naval Battle of Dannoura fought off the straits that separate the main island from Kyushu. This famous victory established Yoshitsune at the age of twenty-six as the foremost military commander in Japan. It was all the more impressive in that his eastern forces were unaccustomed to naval engagements and were fighting in an area where the Tairas had particularly strong support. The early part of the battle went against the Minamotos; but the sudden change of the tide in the middle of the afternoon proved disastrous for the Tairas, and soon the sea was (as the chronicles tell us) dyed with their blood, and the red Taira banners flecked the surface of the water like maple leaves in autumn. Among the countless victims of the catastrophe was Taira no Kiyomori’s widow who leapt into the waves clapping the child Emperor, Antoku. The victory announcement that Yoshitsune sent to the Court in Kyoto was impressively laconic: “On the twenty-fourth day of the Third Month at the Hour of the Hare at Dannoura in the Province of Nagato . . . the Tairas were annihilated. The Sacred Mirror and the Sacred Seal are being safely returned to the Capital.”

With their defeat at Dannoura the hegemony of the Tairas came to an abrupt end. During twenty-six years they had supplanted the Fujiwaras as the dominant power in the capital; their military strength had given them virtually dictatorial control over large areas of the country, and vast wealth accrued to them from their estates and from maritime commerce. Kiyomori’s highhanded methods and intransigence, however, had made him increasingly disliked, not only at Court, where he was regarded as a bullying upstart, but in the Buddhist temples and, most damaging of all, among important elements of the warrior class in the provinces. Though widely resented during their years of prosperity, the Tairas acquired a sort of retroactive popularity thanks to their cataclysmic defeat. The traditional empathy with the loser—the psychology of bōganbiki—inevitably evoked sympathy for a family that experienced the most dramatic rise and fall in all Japanese history. This, combined with Buddhist ideas of fatality and karma, underlies the famous Japanese adage, Ogura Heike wa hitokotakarazu (“The proud Tairas endure but for a little time”); and it inspired the opening chronicle of “The Tales of the Tairas,” one of the most affecting statements in literature about the uncertainty of human fortunes:

The toll of Jotan’s temple bell echoes the transience of all earthly things; the hue of the blossoms on the sālā trees displays the truth that those who flourish must surely fall. The proud ones of this world endure but for a moment like a spring night’s dream. In the end the brave are brought low and scattered like dust before the wind.

The speed and totality of the Tairas’ fall were the measure of Yoshitsune’s success. Though the Minamoto victory was the outcome of Yoritomo’s statecraft and careful preparations, the war
might have dragged on for many years after the Tairas entrenched themselves in their base at Shikoku had it not been for Yoshitsune, who by his Napoleonic verve and imagination broke the stalemate and brought the conflict to an end in a mere five weeks. Now the young conquering hero returned to Kyoto, the cynosure of general admiration and praise, with a degree of popularity and prestige at Court that no member of the military class had enjoyed for centuries. Yet this moment of Yoshitsune’s culminating triumph was the turning point in his career, which now abruptly started on its downhill course. The key to this amazing peripetia is, of course, Minamoto no Yoritomo, whose personality and long-term objectives made a clash with Yoshitsune inevitable, and whose political acumen ensured that in this sort of battle he would be the victor.

The estrangement between Yoritomo and Yoshitsune is typical of the dissensions that bedevilled the Minamoto clan and that caused them to spend almost as much time in fighting each other as in opposing their common adversary. Originally the hostility between the two men was one-sided: it was only after extreme provocation, culminating in an assassination attempt, that Yoshitsune resigned himself to the knowledge that his brother was a mortal enemy. The legendary accounts suggest that one of the main causes for Yoritomo’s ire was jealousy arising from the dazzling military successes and consequent adulation of Yoshitsune. In particular, we are told, he was enraged by Yoshitsune’s attitude that the final victory at Dannoura was due to his own prowess rather than to divine favour and to the combined efforts of the Minamoto warriors. This may be part of the explanation, but we must be wary of sources that deliberately paint Yoritomo in dark colours. It has been said that his character was flawed by a streak of cruel perversity which he directed most fiercely against members of his own family. Over the years, it is true, Yoritomo managed to destroy almost every close relation who showed any real talent or originality; but whether this was due to a “cruel nature” or to cool political calculations remains a moot point, since there are no relevant documents and all the existing works are tendentious.

Apart from any possible psychological compulsions, Yoritomo’s hostility to his brother can readily be explained as a by-product of his fundamental political objectives. He envisaged a new system of law and order under the control of a warrior class dominated by the Minamoto clan in which he would be the unquestioned overlord and in which all the other clansmen, including his closest relations, would obey him as vassals. It was partly in order to consolidate this new ruling class and to impose discipline and cohesion upon his contentious subordinates that in 1880 he established his military headquarters in the eastern encampment of Kamakura, several hundred mountainous miles (and a fortnight’s hard journey) from Kyoto. Here, in a rugged Spartan atmosphere, diametrically opposed to the ease, sophistication, and aestheticism of the ancient capital, he succeeded in forming an entirely new type of administration based primarily upon the needs of the samurai class; and it was his firm principle that all military vassals owed their allegiance exclusively to Kamakura and must never take orders from the Court or from any other authority in the land.

Yoritomo proceeded with quiet deliberation. To overthrow the Tairas he appointed successive members of his own clan as military commanders, while he himself remained in Kamakura, securing the eastern base and strengthening the new military administration. When a general like Yoshinaka proved to be obstreperous and threatened the success of his overall policy, Yoritomo did not hesitate to eliminate him regardless of blood relationship; and for such purposes he was quite prepared to use other members of his family. His great fear was not dissension among his Minamoto clansmen but rather that two or more of his unruly relatives might join against him and, possibly in collusion with the Court, challenge the authority of Kamakura. So far as the Tairas themselves were concerned, Yoritomo always took their eventual defeat for granted. From the outset of the civil war he looked beyond the day when his clan would win the final battle, and concentrated on establishing a settled system under firm, efficacious Minamoto rule in Kamakura.

To ensure the loyalty of his vassals Yoritomo made it clear that no members of the military class might receive favours directly from Kyoto. He alone had the right to reward his followers for their service and, if such rewards were to take the form of Court appointments (appointments which, though devoid of content, still had all the heady prestige of titles in modern England), they must be recommended by him. It was his younger brother’s flagrant violation of this rule that first roused Yoritomo’s anger against him. As a reward for Yoshitsune’s victories the Retired
Emperor appointed him Lieutenant in the Imperial Police (a much-coveted sinecure) and, more important, granted him the privilege of waiting in attendance upon the Emperor in the Senior Courtiers' Chamber. According to one account, Yoritomo resented that this honour, an unusual one for military men, should have been accorded not to himself but to a younger brother of far lower birth. Perhaps so, but the main reason for Yoritomo's suspicions was that Yoshitsune had deliberately violated the code of the lord-vassal relationship by accepting honours that had been neither recommended nor approved by himself. In Yoritomo's scheme of things this relationship superseded any ties of blood or friendship. Since his overriding aim was to consolidate his strength in the new peacetime conditions that would follow the defeat of the Tairas, he could not tolerate any individual or group that refused to submit totally to his rules. Rightly or wrongly it appeared that Yoshitsune represented a potential threat to the new order, a nucleus round whom dissident anti-Kamakura elements at Court, in the temples, and among the military might gather to cause renewed disruption and civil conflict. It was this fear, rather than the cruel, vindictive character of the legendary Yoritomo, that explains his implacable attitude to the young hero.

What were the personal relations between these two remarkable brothers? Tradition has it that they first met in Yoritomo's eastern headquarters at the outbreak of the anti-Taira uprising in 1180, and there are stories of later encounters; but in fact it is uncertain whether they ever saw each other at all. Clearly Yoritomo never shared the general enthusiasm about his brother, whom he doubtless regarded as an unreliable young hothead, corrupted by his upbringing in the capital and his close association with Court circles, and woefully lacking in obedience, discipline, and the other essential qualities of the eastern samurai. In his mind Yoshitsune was something of an anachronism, who, for all his military prowess, was unable to understand the fundamental changes that were taking place in the country. Furthermore, he was never prepared to accept Yoshitsune as a social equal. One of the chronicles recounts an incident (dated 1186) during a ceremony outside Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura when Yoritomo instructed his young brother to hold a horse by the reins. When Yoshitsune balked at this menial task, Yoritomo tartly ordered him to do as he was told. The story reflects Yoritomo's general attitude. Yoshitsune may have been his half-brother, but above all he was a vassal and must be made to behave like one.

The difficulties between the brothers, which sprang from a combination of historical circumstances and personal temperament, were exacerbated by two very different men, Goshihakawa and Kajiwara no Kagetoki. In the year of the Tairas' final defeat the reigning Emperor was a boy of five, and such influence as the imperial family retained was exercised principally by Goshihakawa, who, since his brief reign some three decades earlier had consolidated a position of authority in the capital as Retired (or Cloistered) Emperor. The growing ascendancy of the military class made this position increasingly difficult, but Goshihakawa was a subtle man, much addicted to intrigue and conspiracy, and, though the last vestiges of real power were rapidly slipping from the Court, he managed to stay afloat in a period of stormy change. Having no military strength of his own, he was obliged to steer a careful course in his dealings with the warrior class. His policy towards the various commanders who were competing for supremacy was vacillating and at times ignominious; but the Court had neither the power nor the will to risk a confrontation with the military. In dealing with the victorious Minamotos, the Retired Emperor took advantage of the rivalries within their quarrelsome clan to play one member off against the other, hoping that eventually he would emerge on the winning side or at least retain some influence in an uneasy balance of power. It was no doubt in line with this policy that after the Battle of Ichinotani, and again after the final victory at Dannoura, he decided to reward Yoshitsune directly, fully realizing that such unprecedented honours would provoke Yoritomo's anger and keep the two Minamoto leaders at loggerheads.

The Retired Emperor appears to have developed a sincere personal regard for Yoshitsune during his period of residence in the capital; it is also likely that he considered this somewhat naive young general to be less of a threat to the Court than Yoritomo, who in his new headquarters at Kamakura was planning to alter the power structure of Japan, relegating the Court to a position of irremediable impotence. These were probably the considerations in Goshihakawa's mind when at the end of 1187 he agreed to make Yoshitsune the Chief Steward of all the manorial estates in Kyushu and to entrust him with the task of "chastising" his elder brother as an enemy of the Court. Whatever devious motives the
Retired Emperor may have had, his machinations after the fall of the Tairas were certainly one of the main factors in the rupture between the two brothers and played an important part in the events that led to Yoshitsune’s downfall. The Retired Emperor’s support was short-lived: once Yoshitsune was a fugitive, Goshirakawa reversed his former order, explaining that it had been issued against his will, and now commissioned the elder brother to chastise the younger.

In addition to suffering from Goshirakawa’s friendship, Yoshitsune was bedevilled by a series of reports and rumours that found their way to Kamakura. Some of these calumnies appear to have emanated from his envious half-brother, Noriyori; but the main source was Kajiwara no Kagetoki, one of Yoritomo’s closest retainers, who originally endeared himself to his master by saving his life in an early battle against the Tairas. From all that we can reliably tell, Kajiwara was typical of the hard-working, loyal, somewhat dour warriors who were the backbone of Yoritomo’s eastern regime; but in the legend, especially as it developed in later centuries, he is represented as a sort of super-villain, a man whose consuming envy and hatred of Yoshitsune made him god his master into committing his worst injustices.

Thanks to his abilities and to Yoritomo’s support, Kajiwara rose rapidly in the martial hierarchy and was appointed Assistant Director of the Warriors’ Office. As the war against the Tairas approached its climax, Yoritomo despatched him to the western front to assist in the final attack; according to traditional accounts, however, his real function was to observe Yoshitsune and report anything suspicious to Kamakura. He did not have to wait long for an opportunity to traduce the young general. At a council of war on the eve of the Battle of Yashima the two men became involved in a furious quarrel, the so-called Reverse Oars controversy, which almost led to blows and which allowed Kajiwara to send Yoritomo a damning report about his hotheaded young brother. The following account, quoted from “The Tales of the Tairas,” evokes the high-spirited, disrespectful character of the hero as he is traditionally pictured in the “successful” part of his career, and incidentally suggests why he was eventually bound to incur his brother’s enmity:

The greater and lesser lords of the Eastern Provinces gathered at Watanabe. “We have not yet had any experience of fighting at sea,” said one of them, “How shall we manage?” “I think that for this particular battle we had better fit our ships with reverse oars,” suggested Kajiwara no Kagetoki. “And what may they be?” asked Yoshitsune. “On horseback one can ride in either direction,” explained Kajiwara, “since it is a simple matter to turn one’s steed left or right. But a ship cannot be swung round so easily. I therefore suggest that we fit oars at both bows and sterns of our ships... so that we can readily change direction if necessary.” “What an inauspicious thing to suggest at the beginning of a fight!” exclaimed Yoshitsune. “A soldier enters battle with the intention of never retreating. It is only after things have gone badly that he [even] thinks of turning back. What good can come from preparing one’s retreat in advance? Your Lordships may fit these “reverse oars” or “turn-back oars” to your ships by the hundreds or thousands as you please. I myself am quite satisfied with the ordinary oars that have been used in the past.”

“A good general,” said Kajiwara, “is one who advances at the right time but who also knows when to retreat, thus preserving his life to destroy the enemy. A fighter who cannot adapt himself to circumstances is called a wild-boar warrior, and no one respects such a man.” “Wild bear or wild deer—it’s all the same to me,” said Yoshitsune. “The way to win a battle is to push forward and attack the enemy.”

The greater and lesser lords of the Eastern Provinces were amused. They did not dare laugh openly since they were afraid of Kajiwara, but their feelings showed in their expressions. On that day Yoshitsune and Kajiwara were on the verge of coming to blows, but the matter was settled without an actual fight.

Yoshitsune’s sensational victory at Yashima did not endear him to Kajiwara, and shortly afterwards, at the outset of the Battle of Dannoura, the two men were again embroiled in a clash of wills:

“I should like to lead today’s attack,” said Kajiwara. “Yes,” said Yoshitsune, “but I am here for that job.” “Outrageous!” exclaimed Kajiwara. “Surely you are the commander-in-chief.”

“No so,” said Yoshitsune. “Our commander-in-chief is the Lord of Kamakura. I am simply his deputy in battle just as you are.”

Kajiwara, unable to press his request any further, muttered, “This man is unsuited by nature for leading warriors.” Yoshitsune overheard the remark and, putting his hand to his sword, shouted, “And you are the greatest fool in all Japan.”

“I have no master but the Lord of Kamakura,” said Kajiwara, also reaching for his weapon.
Once again the two men were about to cross swords; they were barely restrained by their fellow warriors, who reminded them that a quarrel like this could help only their common enemy and would certainly displease Yoriitomo. According to "The Tales of the Taira," this latest flare-up inspired Kajiwara to transmit further calumnies "which finally succeeded in bringing Yoshitsune to his death."

After the triumph at Dannoura, Kajiwara did his best to detract from Yoshitsune's role by emphasizing in his despatch to Kamakura that the victory was due to divine succour and not to the skill of any particular commander. Later in the same year, when relations between the two brothers had deteriorated still further, Kajiwara no Kagetoki, who had now returned to the eastern headquarters, informed Yoriitomo that his younger brother, far from obeying the recent orders to "chastise" his uncle, Yukiiie, was in fact conspiring secretly with him in Kyoto and planning joint action against Kamakura. This rumour aroused Yoriitomo's worst suspicions about collusion between members of his family and led directly to his decision to order Yoshitsune's assassination. Thus the super-villain, having systematically fostered resentment against the hero, provided his enemy with an ideal pretext to destroy him.

Though Yoshitsune was slow to realize it, the sad truth was that his final victory over the Taira had largely eliminated his raison d'etre in Yoriitomo's overall scheme. From Kamakura's point of view the young man's courage, resourcefulness, and military prowess had served their purpose and now threatened to become a nuisance. In the words of the old Chinese proverb, "Once the cunning hare is killed, the swift hound will be cooked." Yoshitsune had accomplished his main function, the destruction of the enemy clan, and it now required little provocation for Yoriitomo to dispose of him entirely. The theme of worldly ingratitude adds to the poignancy of Yoshitsune's career as we move into the final and most important part of the story.

A few weeks after his triumphant entry into Kyoto, the hero set out for Kamakura to make his victory report in person to Yoriitomo and to hand over the principal Taira prisoners whom he had captured in his last battle. He was not allowed to reach his destination. On arrival at a nearby post station he was instructed to await further orders, and there he remained for about a week in a state of increasing anxiety. Evidently realizing that

his brother had heard damaging rumours about him, he sent repeated protestations of loyalty, all of which went unanswered. Finally he grew desperate, and from the little post station of Koshigoe about a mile from Kamakura he addressed his famous "Koshigoe letter" to one of his brother's chief ministers. Though Yoshitsune probably sent some sort of emotional appeal to Kamakura at this time, the particular document that has come down to us is full of additions and embellishments that are deliberately designed to build up sympathy for the mistreated hero. This final appeal, however, is a most important part of the Yoshitsune legend, with its mixture of bravado and an almost masochistic indulgence in misfortune, it gives valuable insights into the psychology of heroic defeat:

5th day of the 6th month of the 2nd year of Genryaku [1187]

I, Minamoto no Yoshitsune, Lieutenant of the Outer Palace Guards, respectfully venture to address Your Excellency. Having been chosen as His Lordship's [Yoriitomo's] deputy and being entrusted with an Imperial commission, I overthrew the enemies of the Court by a display of those military arts that have been passed down from generation to generation in our family, and thus did I expunge the disgrace that we have suffered by our defeat. I had thought to receive special commendation for these deeds of mine, but to my astonishment I became the object of the most damning slanders, in consequence of which my great exploits have been ignored. I, Yoshitsune, though innocent of all offence, have incurred blame; though worthy of honour and guilt of no mistake, I have fallen into His Lordship's disfavour.

So here I remain, vainly shedding crimson tears. . . . I have not been permitted to refute the accusations of my slanderers or [even] to set foot in Kamakura, but have been obliged to languish idly these many days with no possibility of declaring the sincerity of my intentions. It is now so long since I have set eyes on His Lordship's compassionate countenance that the bond of our blood brotherhood seems to have vanished.

Is this misfortune the outcome of fate, or is it retribution from some previous existence of mine? Woe is me! Unless the venerable spirit of our dear father should be reborn into this world, what man will reveal [to his Lordship] the anguish that afflicts my mind, and who will bestow any pity upon me?

I hesitate to write this further letter lest it appear to be another [idle] declaration of personal feelings, but I am bound to tell you that shortly after my parents gave me life His Excellency, my father, passed to another world and I became an orphan and was carried to [the capital] clasped in my mother's bosom, and that thereafter my mind has never
been at peace for a single moment. Though I managed to drag out my useless existence, I could not move about the Capital in safety and had to wander from province to province, hiding myself in many obscure villages, being obliged to make my nesting place in distant parts of the land and to serve common people and peasants.

Then suddenly fortune came my way and I was sent up to the Capital to overthrow the Taira clan. Having first chastised Yoshinaka for his offences, I set about destroying the Tairas and for this purpose I spurred my horse on craggy precipices, heedless of my life in the face of the enemy; at other times I braved the fierce winds and waves on the great sea, not caring that my body might sink to the bottom and be devoured by monsters of the deep. My armour and helmet were my pillow; my bow and arrows were my trade.

Concerning my promotion to be Lieutenant of the Fifth Rank [in the Imperial Police] I welcomed this appointment as the greatest possible honour for our Minamoto clan. Yet now I am plunged into this state of profound grief and bitter lamentation. Realizing that only through the help of the Buddhas and the Gods could I hope that my appeal might succeed, I inscribed oaths on talismans of various temples and shrines, swearing by the Gods of the great and small shrines in Japan and by the spirits of the underworld that I had never for a moment harboured any evil ambitions; and all these pledges of loyalty I submitted (to Kamakura). Yet have I received no pardon.

This is the land of the Gods, but it appears that the Gods have not heeded my petition; and so, having nowhere else to turn, I now throw myself upon Your Excellency’s great mercy and entreat you to bring my declaration to His Lordship’s notice on a suitable occasion, so that he may be persuaded of my innocence.

It is impossible to express myself fully in writing, but I have tried to inform Your Excellency on the main points and respectfully beg you to give your attention to this letter that I now most humbly submit.

Minamoto no Yoshitsune

The hero’s resourcefulness and prowess on the battlefront contrast with the childlike simplicity that he showed in his personal relations—a type of innocence and naiveté that in the Japanese tradition is so often associated with makoto. For even at this late stage he seems to have believed that all his difficulties would disappear if only he could meet Yoritomo face to face and declare the “sincerity of his intentions.” His hopes for a reconciliation were shattered when he received the humiliating order to return directly to the capital without entering Kamakura. Yoritomo compounded the insult by repossessing the Taira estates that his brother had received as a reward for his military services and, worse still, by dropping him from the ranks of the Minamoto liegemen. Within a week of writing his Koshigoe letter, Yoshitsune set out despondently for his journey back to Kyoto.

A few months later Yoritomo followed up this rebuff by trying to have his brother removed from the world entirely. For this purpose he despatched a warrior monk to the capital with orders to assassinate Yoshitsune. The monk and his henchmen carried out a night attack on the hero’s mansion; but they were driven off, and the ringleader himself, having fled to the northern hills of Kurama, was tracked down by Yoshitsune’s friends in the monastery, brought back to the city, and executed. This crude attempt on his life was enough to convince even Yoshitsune that there was no longer any hope for a reconciliation and that he would have to seek allies if he was to survive. It was now that he obtained the document in which the Retired Emperor instructed him to “chastise” his elder brother as an enemy of the Court.

Goshirakawa’s order may have conferred official legitimacy on Yoshitsune’s future enterprises, but it failed to give him the material support that he needed for a campaign. Instead of striking at Kamakura, he and his uncle, Yukie, accompanied by a couple of hundred men, now proceeded to the west in the hope of collecting new recruits to their side. This caution seems strangely out of character for Yoshitsune, who had always been noted for his bold tactics, and it is clear that Yoritomo himself expected his impetuous young brother to launch an immediate attack against the east. We can only guess the reasons why at this juncture Yoshitsune should have changed to such careful behaviour. Possibly he had been unnerved and depressed by Yoritomo’s hostility and had lost the derring-do and optimism of his early period; possibly, too, he still hesitated to launch an attack against his elder brother, whom he had obeyed for so many years as head of both the Minamoto clan and of his immediate family; also his uncle may have persuaded him that it would be madness to confront the might of Kamakura without first recruiting a reasonable force of men.

In any case the luck that so often favoured Yoshitsune in his more dynamic days had now run out. Shortly after leaving Kyoto and embarking on the Inland Sea, his little troop was almost entirely destroyed in a sudden storm, which (as Yoritomo was informed) had arisen from the will of the gods. By some extraor-
dinary chance Yoshitsune and his uncle survived the shipwreck, which killed nearly all their men; but any hopes of raising armed support—a feeble prospect from the outset—had now vanished, and the most they could hope was to avoid capture by the hostile troops who surrounded them on all sides. After the shipwreck the two men parted forever, and some months later Yukiie, the inept uncle, was run to ground and killed.

Yoshitsune was now an isolated outlaw, proscribed by the Court and ferociously pursued by his brother, who ordered what was to become the greatest manhunts in the history of Japan. After a series of narrow escapes, Yoshitsune managed to hide his tracks entirely. It was thought that he might make his way back to Kyoto (which in fact he did), and there was a door-to-door search in the city; troops were also sent to many of the temples where it was believed Yoshitsune might take refuge; warriors in every province and all the barriers were put on the alert and directed to follow each possible clue that could reveal his whereabouts. But twelfth-century Japan, with its poor communications and slow transport, was an immense country; and the complicated, mountainous terrain made it an ideal hiding place for an ingenious fugitive, especially for one like Yoshitsune who must have had many secret well-wishers.

Month after month the great hunt continued. Even the Buddhas and the gods were enlisted in the cause: prayers for Yoshitsune’s capture were recited in many of the temples; and on the orders of Kamakura similar appeals were made at the Ise Shrine. On one occasion the Intendant of a certain temple dreamt that he had met Yoshitsune in the eastern province of Közuke. He dutifully reported this event, and a special searching party was sent there; but in fact Yoshitsune was near Kyoto several hundred miles to the west. Yoritomo’s desire to track down his brother appears to have become obsessive, and he was enraged by the failure of the hunt. He obviously suspected that the Court was not doing its share, and about a year after launching the search he wrote as follows to the Retired Emperor in Kyoto:

[Yoshitsune] has sympathizers in every part of the land, and we cannot possibly effect his capture with the present half-hearted measures. It is therefore my intention to despatch a force of some twenty or thirty thousand men to make a thorough search of every hill and temple in the country. Since this may lead to certain untoward eventualities, I request that, if the Court can propose some sure method of capturing [the enemy], this should be communicated [forthwith to Kamakura].

The Retired Emperor, now thoroughly cowed by the Lord of Kamakura, reacted to this ill-concealed threat by issuing additional search orders. It was shortly afterwards that Yoshitsune, realizing he could not longer remain in the region of the capital, decided to escape to the domain of the “northern Fujiwaras” in Oshu.

There has been much speculation about the exact route that Yoshitsune followed on his dangerous journey through the central and eastern provinces (now all under the sway of Kamakura) to his final destination in the remote northeastern part of Japan, where he arrived towards the end of 1187 after some six months of travel. Since even his brother’s frantic search could not uncover the hero’s whereabouts, we can hardly expect, seven centuries later, to find out anything accurate about his fugitive period. He probably received considerable protection from monks and warrior-priests in temples near the capital and along his route—men who had known him in palmer days and who sympathized with him in his misfortune. According to the legend, both he and his followers disguised themselves as “mountain monks” (yamabushi) travelling through the eastern provinces to collect subscriptions for rebuilding a temple. The route traditionally ascribed to Yoshitsune for his escape to the east is identical with the one followed in later centuries by ascetic pilgrims from the Kumano district south of the capital; and many of the stories about the fugitive period may well have been invented by these monks and recited by them during their long travels. This is perhaps one of the ways in which the Yoshitsune legend spread through Japan, and it may also explain the particular route that was chosen for him in the ballads.

By far the most famous of the escape adventures took place at the newly erected barrier of Ataka on the Japan Sea, where Yoshitsune barely evaded detection and capture owing to the resourcefulness of his chief follower, the stalwart priest Benkei. This story, which inspired two of the best plays in Japanese literature, the fifteenth-century No drama Ataka, and the nineteenth-century Kabuki play Kunjinchō, or “The Subscription List,” is of course fictitious. Yet it may well be based on actual events in which Yoshitsune was saved from disaster by people
who recognized him as "the most wanted man in Japan" but were moved by such personal sympathy, such a sense of *mono no aware* ("the pathos of things"), that they were prepared to incur risks on his behalf.

The drama, which brings into focus some of the main aspects of Yoshitsune's downhill career, is important for a study of heroic failure. The various presentations agree in their general approach to the events, though the Kabuki version is a great deal more elaborate than the No play. The three main characters in Ataka are Benkei, the swaggering warrior-priest; Lord Togashi, an important vassal of Yoritomo's who has been appointed to guard the strategic barrier; and Yoshitsune, the quarry whom all Japan is hunting. The play starts, in typical No style, with a succinct account of the situation by Togashi:

I am the officer in charge of the barrier at the port of Ataka in Kaga Province. Now Yoshitsune has incurred the enmity of his elder brother, Lord Yoritomo, and can no longer remain in the Capital. He and a dozen followers, all disguised as mountain priests, are said to be on their way to Oshu to seek the protection of Lord Hidehira. Hearing of this, Lord Yoritomo has ordered that the new barriers be erected in every province, and he has instructed us to subject all mountain priests to close investigation.

Next Yoshitsune and his small band of followers enter the stage disguised as itinerant monks. They are dismayed to hear about the new barrier that has been erected at the nearby harbour of Ataka. Some of the men want to break through, but Benkei explains that this will endanger the rest of their long journey and advises that they resort to a trick.

Yoshitsune: Suggest a plan for us, Benkei!

Benkei: Very well, my lord. Allow me to propose the following course of action. I and these other men all look like rough mountain-priests, but your noble appearance is hard to disguise. May I respectfully suggest that you give your brocade stole to the porter and instead put his pannier on your back? Then, if you follow behind us at a slight distance, you will surely be taken for a real porter.

By now Yoshitsune, having become almost entirely passive, is prepared to accept all Benkei's suggestions, and he willingly changes places with the lowly porter. The party then proceeds towards the barrier of Ataka, where the blackened heads of some recently executed monks can be seen under a tree. Undeterred by this grisly sight, they walk up to the barrier. The dramatic climax is Togashi's confrontation with Benkei, who angrily insists that they are a group of innocent monks on their way to raise subscriptions for rebuilding Todai Temple in Nara. Togashi says that he cannot possibly let them pass, and it turns out that three suspect monks were decapitated by the barrier guards on the previous day. Yoshitsune and his followers have walked straight into the lion's mouth, but Benkei is unshaken. He starts a fierce argument with Togashi, after which he and the other "priests" try to browbeat the guards with loud Buddhist chants. Togashi challenges Benkei to read the subscription list that monks would normally carry on such a mission. Of course Benkei possesses no such list, but he rises splendidly to the occasion by taking a scroll from the porter's pannier and improvising a history of Todai Temple full of erudite theological references. The guards, hypnotized by Benkei's recital, allow him and his party to pass the barrier without further demur.

Chorus: ...[Benkei] reads the scroll in such a booming voice that the heavens themselves resound. The terrified guards

In fear and trembling let them pass,
In fear and trembling let them pass.

Togashi: Hurry and cross the barrier!

Sword-Bearer: Pray pass, pray pass!

The party is almost out of danger when suddenly Togashi's sword-bearer recognizes that the pretended porter, who has been lagging behind, is none other than Yoshitsune himself. Togashi orders him to halt. Benkei, realizing that the situation is desperate, furiously berates the porter for having caused this delay; then he snatches his staff and beats him furiously. His purpose, of course, is to convince the barrier-keepers that, despite the physical resemblance, the porter cannot possibly be Yoshitsune, since no retainer would dare raise a hand against his lord under any circumstances. Togashi admits that he was wrong to suspect the porter and gives the party final permission to cross the barrier.

When they are safely on the other side, there is an emotional scene in which Benkei tearfully begs his master for forgiveness;
Yoshitsune, also weeping, thanks Benkei for having saved his life and (much as in the Koshigoe letter) bemoans the world's injustice that has brought him to his present state:

Chorus: 1. Yoshitsune, was born of a warrior's line and dedicated my life to Yoritomo. I submerged the bodies of the enemy beneath the waves of the western sea. I slept, in the hills and fields and on the shore, while my horse half sunk in snow. By the sea at dusk I fought in Suma and Akashi, and within three years I defeated the enemy. Yet my loyalty was all in vain. Alas, what a wretched fate is mine!

Yoshitsune: This is indeed a sorry world
Where nothing happens as one hopes.

Chorus: ... It is a world where the sincere man suffers,
While the slanderer goes from strength to strength.
Are there no Gods or Buddhas to protect us?
How wretched is the life of man in this sad world!
How wretched is his life!

The play ends on a somewhat merrier note as Lord Togashi offers wine to the departing pilgrims by way of apology for his unjust suspicions. Benkei pretends to become drunk and performs an energetic "manly dance" (otokomai). Shortly afterwards the party proceeds on its journey, while the chorus chants,

... Let us hasten from this place!
Strung tight as a bow,
Do not relax your care.
Guards of the barrier,
We bid you now farewell.
Shouldering their panniers,
They make their way towards the land of Ōshū,
Feeling as though they had trod on a tiger's tail
Or escaped from a serpent's mouth.

This time Yoshitsune has escaped; but every reader and spectator knows that the hero is heading ineluctably towards his doom.

Much of the play's impact comes from the fact that Lord Togashi has actually suspected Benkei's deception from the outset; the reading of the fraudulent subscription list, though delibi-
terrifying colossus of a man with his black armour and murderous battle club, who is capable of fantastic feats. Nor was he a mere brainless bully: apart from his physical strength Benkei displayed humour, wisdom, and (as we can tell from his tour de force at Ataka barrier) an impressive erudition. For all his blustering violence, he was capable of much charm and even gentleness. Above all he was a paragon of loyalty, whose devotion to his master became ever greater as the situation grew more desperate.

The relationship between the two men is reminiscent of the friendship between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, the woebegone Spanish gentleman who is one of the full-fledged heroic failures in Western literature. In twelfth-century Japan, as in sixteenth-century Spain, the ineffectual, failure-prone knight is supported by a crude, resourceful companion with irresistible spirits and gusto. And one of the most attractive aspects of both Yoshitsune and Don Quixote is the way in which each man accepts, even enjoys, the antics of his low-born retainer, knowing that underneath is a bedrock of strength and fidelity. There are other parallels between the roles of the two retainers and their masters. Both Sancho Panza and Benkei become increasingly important as their respective stories progress, and both grow steadily in stature. As Don Quixote's fantasies come to be more and more debilitating, his servant's earthy common sense changes into a mature wisdom; similarly, Benkei makes up for his master's increasing passivity and pessimism by revealing unexpected resources of intelligence and learning.

Another character who becomes prominent in the later legends and who also represents an ideal stereotype of loyalty and courage is Yoshitsune's favourite mistress, Shizuka, famous as the most beautiful woman in Japan and also as the greatest dancer of her time. Shizuka's legendary quality is emphasized by the supernatural power of her performances. In "The Chronicle of Yoshitsune" she dances in the presence of the Retired Emperor and miraculously ends the terrible drought that has afflicted the country for a hundred days. During Yoshitsune's downhill period, Shizuka clings with passionate devotion to her ill-starred lover and insists on accompanying him when he leaves the capital. In the No play, Yoshino Shizuka ("Shizuka at Yoshino"), when Yoshitsune is being pursued by Yoritomo's forces, Shizuka distracts the hostile soldiers by performing one of her magnificent dances and telling them about her lover's fine character. On this occasion she enables the hero to escape; but, after the disastrous shipwreck on the Inland Sea, Benkei insists that she will slow down their flight and must return to Kyoto. Yoshitsune, who has now entered his passive phase, is obliged to agree and the two lovers have an agonizing farewell. Almost immediately after their separation Shizuka is betrayed by the men who were supposed to escort her to the capital.

She is arrested and sent to Kamakura. Here she is interrogated about her lover's whereabouts but staunchly refuses to betray him. When it is discovered that she is pregnant, the Lord of Kamakura decrees that any male child must be killed, since no potential heir of Yoshitsune's may be allowed to survive. Predictably enough, Shizuka gives birth to a baby boy. The infant is promptly seized and taken to the beach at Yuigahama, where his brains are dashed out against a rock. Later the distraught mother is asked to dance at the shrine of Hachiman, the god of war, in the presence of Yoritomo and his attendants. She complies with the request, but only so that she may have the opportunity to challenge her enemies by improvising defiant love songs in Yoshitsune's praise. Despite this insult she is allowed to return to Kyoto on the following day. There the beautiful young girl cuts off her hair and becomes a nun. She dies in the following year at the age of twenty, unable to endure the sad burden of her worldly memories, and in due course she becomes established as the great romantic figure in the Yoshitsune cycle of legends. Though most of Shizuka's story is fictitious and though her role is always subordinate to her lover's, she may be regarded as the first (and one of the very few) of Japan's failed heroines.

Apart from Benkei, Shizuka, and three other stalwart followers, Yoshitsune was almost entirely isolated during his fugitive period. Why should a leader who had acquired such immense popularity after his military victories suddenly become so feeble and abandoned? Since Yoshitsune's lack of support is the main reason for his spectacular collapse, this is an important question for understanding his heroic career. One fundamental weakness in Yoshitsune's position was that the military support he enjoyed during his victorious years depended entirely on his role as Yoritomo's deputy. The younger brother, being himself a vassal of the Lord of Kamakura, had no important feudal adherents of his own. The captains who fought with him in the battles against
the Tairas were all basically loyal to Kamakura and, once it became clear that he had fallen foul of Yoritomo, they were not prepared to intercede on his behalf. When the break became open and Yoshitsune tried to recruit his own military supporters in the provinces, his efforts were hopeless. "The warriors of Omi Province would not join Yoshitsune," says a diary of the time. "... Though he hunted everywhere for samurai [supporters], few agreed to help him."

Many of the samurai whom Yoshitsune tried to enlist probably sympathized with the young general, but being members of the Minamoto clan they recognized Yoritomo as their overlord and saw that Yoshitsune's prospects of success were far too slim to justify their turning against Kamakura. Not only were they reluctant to back a losing cause, but now after a prolonged period of disruption they were no doubt ready for the stability promised by Yoritomo's regime. As happens so often after years of strife and bloodshed, there appears to have been a decline in what Professor Gaston Bouthoul describes as l'impulsion belligerente and a general desire for peace and security, even among professional fighters. Much as some of his fellow warriors may have admired Yoshitsune for his courage, sincerity, and other personal qualities, they saw that his resistance to Kamakura would keep the country in turmoil, whereas a final victory for Yoritomo would consolidate an efficient military government that could finally restore order to the country and guarantee their own positions.

Apart from all this, Yoshitsune's quest for followers was hampered by his own impulsive, impractical, individualistic character. He totally lacked his brother's skill at manoeuvre and ability to use other people for his own purposes. Though a good leader of soldiers, he appears to have had little talent for getting along with his fellow commanders, and we know that many of Yoritomo's generals came to resent him. In other words, Yoshitsune was a hopeless politician, temperamentally incapable of the manipulation, cool planning, and compromise that are necessary for lasting worldly success. Consequently, when it came to a crisis, he could gain no support from captains with large bodies of men under their command, and had to depend on a small group of loyal followers, many of them mountain bandits, warrior-priests, and outlaw types, who were bound to him by strong personal connexions. One by one his supporters were brought to bay by the forces of Kamakura and tortured, killed, or driven to suicide, until Yoshitsune was left with only a pathetic handful of survivors. With this motley little band he reached his final refuge in the northeast.

On arrival in Ōshū, Yoshitsune was given shelter and promise of lasting support by Hidehira, the clan leader of the northern Fujiwaras, who had already befriended the hero in his youth when he was fleeing from the Tairas. Hidehira was the supreme ruler of the north, and his autonomous territory of Ōshū may be regarded as the first major fief in Japanese history. Its strategic position in a wild, remote region, where it was defended by an army of tough and disciplined fighters, had made it virtually impregnable, and now in 1187 it represented the last serious obstacle to the hegemony of Kamakura. Here Yoshitsune was securely installed in a new residence that Hidehira built for him between his own mansion and Koromo River.

As it turned out, the hero's decision to stay in Ōshū suited Yoritomo perfectly. First he demanded that Hidehira hand over the fugitive, but (as he had no doubt expected) his threats produced no effect on the doughty old chieftain. Then, on the pretext of "chastising" his rebellious brother, the Lord of Kamakura pressed the Court for an order to attack Ōshū. Even at this late stage, when Kyoto was thoroughly demoralized by the overpowering might of Kamakura, the Retired Emperor demurred before issuing the crucial edict. Meanwhile an event had taken place in Ōshū that helped Yoritomo in his plans and accelerated the hero's catastrophe. When Yoshitsune arrived to seek Hidehira's protection, the chieftain was already ninety-one years old (a fantastic age for the time), and only a few months later he died. His final command to his sons was that they continue to shelter Yoshitsune from the wrath of Kamakura. Presumably he knew how Yoritomo would take advantage of his death and wanted to forestall any betrayal of the youth he had agreed to shelter.

On hearing the fateful news Yoshitsune galloped frantically to Hidehira's house. The death of the old chieftain was not only a practical blow but an emotional disaster; for Yoshitsune was virtually an orphan and Hidehira had become a substitute for both father and brother. "The Chronicle of Yoshitsune" emphasizes his archetypal sense of isolation:

"Alas," declared Yoshitsune, "I should never have travelled this great distance had I not put all my trust in [Lord Hidehira]. I lost my father,
Yoshitomo, when I was only one year old. Though my mother remained in Kyoto, our relations became strained since she sided with the Tairas. I also had many brothers, but they were so widely scattered that I never saw them as a child. And [then] Yoshitomo became my enemy. Ah, no parting between parent and child could be sadder than this!"

On the day of the funeral Yoshitsune appeared at the burial grounds clad in the white clothes of mourning: "So great was his sorrow that he wished he might leave the world together with [Lord Hidehira]. There on the desolate moor Yoshitsune bid his last farewell; then he turned away, a solitary, pitiful figure."

The old chieftain's last fears turned out to have been fully justified. As soon as the news of his death reached Kamakura, Yoritomo saw his opportunity and sent a message promising to spare Oshū on condition that his brother be handed over for punishment. Yasuhira, the new chieftain of the northern Fujiwara, blatantly ignored his father's wishes and decided that, it would be foolish to continue alienating Kamakura for the sake of a helpless fugitive. In the fourth month of 1189 he violated Yoshitsune's trust by ordering a surprise attack against his stronghold.

In the Battle of Koromo River, as it is somewhat euphemistically described, Yoshitsune and his small band of nine followers were confronted by an attacking force of some thirty thousand men. In such an unpromising situation the aim of the Japanese warrior is to sell his life as dearly as he can and to take the largest possible number of enemy officers with him to the next world. According to the legend, Yoshitsune's supporters acquitted themselves with fantastic courage and skill until one after another was killed or so seriously wounded that he had to commit suicide.

"The Chronicle of Yoshitsune" gives the most detailed version of the first part of the legend. As the fighting rages outside, the hero himself, ensconced in his stronghold with his wife and two children, sits calmly intoning the scriptures. This may seem rather peculiar behaviour at such a juncture, but it agrees perfectly with the elegant, inactive role that is attributed to Yoshitsune during his last phase. He has reached the eighth book of the Lotus Sutra when Benkei rushes in and informs his master that only he and one other retainer remain alive. "Now that things have reached this pass," adds Benkei, "I wish to come and bid you my last farewell." Yoshitsune replies that, though they long since agreed to die together, this has now become impossible since he cannot go outside and risk facing unworthy enemies. He therefore begs Benkei to return to the fray and hold off the attackers a little longer lest some of the ruffians break in and intrude on his suicide: "I have only a few more lines of the sutra to recite. Protect me with your life until I have finished."

After a tearful exchange of poems Benkei strides out for his last fight, which turns out to be the most coruscating display of his career. His fellow retainer has finally succumbed and Benkei must face the horde alone. He charges the enemy again and again like one possessed, slaughtering them by the dozens, until no one dares approach him. Then there is a lull as he stands in their midst, a vast, solitary figure whose black armour is bristling with the arrows that have been shot at him from all directions. His last moments are reminiscent of El Cid's posthumous attack on horseback:

"Look at that monk!" said one of the soldiers. "He keeps gazing over here as if he's about to attack. And how strangely he smiles! Don't let us go near him or he will surely kill us." They all kept their distance. Then another of the men said, "I have heard that in the past heroes have died while still on their feet. Someone should go up and take a look at him." No one volunteered for the task, but just then a warrior happened to gallop past. The wind from his horse caught Benkei, who had in fact been dead for some time, and he crashed to the ground. He was still grasping his halberd... and as he collapsed he seemed to lunge forward with the weapon. "Look out! He's running wild again," cried the soldiers, retreating rapidly... It was only after Benkei lay completely motionless that the men rushed to his side in an absurd effort to reach him first.

Meanwhile Benkei's delaying tactics have given his master time to finish his recitation and prepare for his own death. Seated in his Buddhist chapel, Yoshitsune turns to his wife's guardian, a valiant warrior named Kanefusa, and asks him how he should commit suicide. Kanefusa recommends the method used by Tadano, one of Yoshitsune's staunchest retainers who had killed himself in the capital in order to avoid capture. "People are still praising him after all this time," explains Kanefusa. "Yes, it is an acceptable method," says Yoshitsune. "I had better make a wide wound." When it comes to the horrifying deed itself, he shows no trace of hesitation or passivity. As in the careers of so
many Japanese heroes, this seems to be the great moment he has awaited, and one has the impression that the ritual has been carefully rehearsed. Having once made his decision, he produces a famous sword that was given to him as a lad by the abbot of Kurama Temple and that he has secreted under his armour ever since his campaigns against the Tairas.

Seizing the sword, Yoshitsune plunged it into his body below the left breast, thrusting it in so far that the blade almost emerged through his back. Then he cut deeply into his stomach and, tearing the wound wide open in three directions, pulled out his intestines. He wiped the sword on the sleeve of his robe, which he then draped over his shoulders, and left the upper part of his body on an arm-rest...

Though still alive, the hero is now immobile, and the agonizing task of killing Yoshitsune’s wife, his son, and his seven-day-old daughter is left to the unfortunate Kanefusa, who hesitates at first but is urged on by his mistress. Surrounded by the inert bodies, he staggers to his feet, intoning a prayer to Amida Buddha.

Yoshitsune was still breathing and now, opening his eyes, he asked about his wife. “She lies dead by your side, my Lord,” replied Kanefusa. Yoshitsune stretched out his hand. “And who is this?” he said. “Is it the boy?” He reached over the child and touched his wife’s body. At the sight Kanefusa was pierced with grief. “Quickly now,” said his master, “burn down the house!”

These were Yoshitsune’s last words. He expired in his chapel at the age of thirty—precisely the age at which Japan’s prototypical hero, the Brave of Yamato, had died on the Plain of Nobo. As soon as Kanefusa saw that his master was dead, he set fire to the entire stronghold in grand Wagnarian style, and then completed his own career by running into the flames, dragging one of the enemy generals with him to his death.

The events immediately following Yoshitsune’s death are unclear, but it appears that Yasuhira’s men managed to recover the hero’s corpse before it was destroyed by the flames and that he was posthumously beheaded. Yasuhira immediately informed Yoritomo that he had carried out his part of the bargain, and a messenger was despatched to Kamakura carrying a black lacquer box in which the hero’s severed head was preserved in sweet rice wine for official inspection and identification. In the middle of the Sixth Month the messenger reached the posting-station of Koshigoe, the very place where Yoshitsune had written his last pathetic letter to his brother, and here the grisly trophy was examined by an official inspection party, which included the hero’s old enemy, Kajiwara no Kageroki. It is said that even this hardhearted villain was so overcome by emotion on seeing the severed head that he was obliged to turn away and that other members of the party (all military men) were reduced to tears.

The head in the black box was identified as being Yoshitsune’s, and this was duly reported to Yoritomo. Here the matter of his death was allowed to rest until in later centuries the hero’s growing popularity led to the fabrication of several bizarre survival theories. It was suggested that a false head had been substituted in the box to deceive the inspection party and that Yoshitsune himself had managed to escape from his burning mansion and fly to the north. According to a legend that grew up in the Tokugawa period, when there was particular interest in the development of Hokkaido, the hero fled to the northern island where he led a campaign against the enemies of the local Ainu; they gratefully chose him as their leader and he ruled over them benevolently. Another survival story is that Yoshitsune fled from Oshi and travelled north through Hokkaido and the island of Sakhalin, eventually reaching Mongolia where he started a new career as Genghis Khan. This theory, concocted in the late Meiji period, was no doubt related to current Japanese ambitions in northern Asia. If Genghis Khan was indeed a thirteenth-century Minamoto warrior, the Japanese could claim an impressive precedent for their expansion on the continent. Proponents of the theory stress the agreement in dates and the facts that both warriors were renowned horsemen and skilled in attack; they also note that Minamoto no Yoshitsune’s name can be read “Gen-gikei,” which is indeed close to “Genghis Khan.” Unfortunately the circumstances that do not fit are somewhat more numerous and persuasive. Still another theory is that Yoshitsune crossed to China and became the ancestor of the Manchu Dynasty. These stories about Yoshitsune’s later life reflect profound folkloric impulses and also have an undeniable charm; but they were never accepted as part of the main legend, whose central theme is that
the hero, far from surviving or succeeding, is fated by his sincerity and lack of political acumen to die at an early age as a glorious failure.

Out of this mixture of fact, half-fact, and legend, what is one to make of the actual characters and historical roles of Yoshitsune and his elder brother? From what is known of the objective circumstances it seems clear enough that Yoshitsune’s downfall was propelled by certain tragic flaws in his own nature which not only made a clash with Yoritomo inevitable but ensured that in any such encounter he would be the loser. From his wild childhood years in the mountains of Kurama he seems to have developed as a high-spirited, impetuous, headstrong young man with little respect for established order and authority. The accounts describing the dynamic part of his career before he lapsed into the elegant passivity of the later legends suggest that he could be blunt, irascible, and tactless in his dealings with fellow commanders. In battle he was brave and resourceful; but he insisted on taking the lead and on doing everything in his own way, leaving little possibility of glory for the other generals. His remarkable record of military success made him overconfident and unwilling to accept advice; and, though he never openly questioned the authority of Kamakura, he tended to exceed his instructions and to act with a degree of independence that was bound to infuriate the authoritarian Yoritomo. If he had faithfully submitted himself to instructions like his lacklustre brother Noriyori, he could never have been a hero but he would undoubtedly have enjoyed a longer and more successful career. As it was, he became a perfect exemplar of the old Japanese adage about the dangers of individualism: “The nail that sticks out is knocked on the head.”

Yoshitsune had a warm, spontaneous nature, which is said to explain much of his popularity among ladies and courtiers in the capital and among priests in the mountain temples. Having been deprived of parental guidance and affection as a child, he evidently hoped for a close relationship with his elder brother; but in the end these aspirations were betrayed and he had to turn for support to the old Fujiwara chieftain, Hidehira, whose death therefore came as a culminating blow. Affectionate, trusting, naive, and pure, Yoshitsune was temperamentally incapable of the realistic calculation and planning that are necessary for mun-
himself rather grandiloquently described as "the beginning of the country" (tenka no sosa), in other words, a new order for Japan. The hero's final service was to take refuge with the northern Fujiwara and thus give Yoritomo the pretext he needed for eliminating his last potential opponents and for incorporating the vast Oshii territories into his own domains.

Already during his residence in the capital Yoshitsune became the victim of political intrigue by the Retired Emperor, who tried to play him off against Yoritomo. It is now evident that at each stage of his career he was used to further the aims of the brother who eventually destroyed him. But again, this very innocence and victimization, far from diminishing Yoshitsune's stature, only add to his heroic poignancy.

In contrast to his unfortunate young brother, whose main practical contribution was the way in which he was exploited by others, Yoritomo established himself as one of the truly creative leaders in Japanese history, who put together new systems of administration, law, and discipline that largely superseded those in force during the past many centuries. Though the old civilian government in Kyoto, deriving its mandate from the prestige of the imperial family, theoretically continued to be the supreme authority in the land, the Minamoto centre in Kamakura, which Yoritomo had originally established as a purely military headquarters, became the second centre in the land and the source of all real power. From the outset of the uprising against the Tairas in 1180, Yoritomo concentrated on politics and administration, directing everything from his distant eastern base and never leading an army. Finally in 1192, when his regime had been consolidated and he was the undisputed political master of the country, he chose the title of Shogun, or Generalissimo. This was a relatively low rank in the Court hierarchy, but it ensured his control of the all-important warrior class. Though actual military rule did not remain long with Yoritomo's immediate family, the shogunal form of government that he created in the late twelfth century continued in one form or another for almost seven hundred years.

Though Yoritomo is recognized by historians as one of Japan's most influential statesmen, his role in the legend (and in the numerous plays and other literary works derived from it) is one of almost unmitigated villainy; for here he is cast as the "successful survivor," whose machinations cause the downfall of the lov-

able, pathetic hero. While the gallant Yoshitsune and his little band of followers occupy the centre of the stage, the Lord of Kamakura lurks in the wings, a coldblooded, heartless man obsessed with hatred of his enemies and lust for personal power. After the defeat of the Tairas he is said to have ordered that the young children of the enemy clan be drowned or buried alive and the older ones stabbed or strangled. We are told that even some of his tough eastern captains hesitated to carry out these hideous commands, yet that finally they had no alternative but to obey. Then, according to the legend, Yoritomo's cruel, jealous nature made him turn against the popular young hero, Yoshitsune, and hound him to his death. In actual fact the Lord of Kamakura had sound reason to resent his insubordinate brother as a source of continued disunity and confusion in the country; but in the legendary version he is inspired entirely by envy and vindictiveness.

Yoshitsune, on the other hand, lives securely in people's imaginations as the ideal Japanese hero whose person and career, especially as developed in the legend, embody almost every characteristic that appeals to the national sensibility. In battle he was imaginative and daring, in private life spontaneous, trusting, and sincere. But above all he was loved for his misfortune and defeat. A peculiarly Japanese type of pathos marks his career from the time of his early youth when he wandered alone through the streets playing his melancholy flute until his last years as a hunted fugitive, the innocent victim of men more powerful, realistic, and cunning than himself, abandoned by everyone but a handful of outlaw followers, and finally betrayed and forced to kill himself at an early age. Yoshitsune's brilliant success during his fighting years was a prerequisite for his greatness, since it made the subsequent collapse all the more impressive and poignant. As Japan's quintessential hero, he maintained his prestige through the centuries by the nature of his tragic failure, which established his name as a byword for emotional identification with the loser.