



Paragons of the Ordinary: The Biographical Literature of Mori Ogai (SHAPS Library of Asian Studies)

Marvin Marcus

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Paragons of the Ordinary is about a quite extraordinary literary achievement: a series of biographies of obscure scholar-literati written by Mori Ogai, one of Japan's most prominent writers and intellectuals. Deeply concerned about the cultural toll taken by Japan's headlong modernization early in this century, Ogai employed the format of newspaper serialization in presenting meticulously researched accounts of individuals who had come to embody exemplary traits and traditional virtues. His unique project, undertaken over the period 1916-1921, resulted in nine interconnected works, the centerpiece of which is based on the life of Shibue Chusai, an all-but-unknown individual toward whom Ogai developed a deep bond of kinship and reverence, much like the sense of discipleship that Marvin Marcus holds toward Ogai.

In exploring Ogai's biographical project, Marcus' aim is to convey a sense of its unique power and authority and to show how this power derives from Ogai's deft use of anecdotal episodes to highlight the exemplary character of his subject. Marcus places Ogai's work in the context of a long tradition of biographical narrative in Japan; at the same time he calls attention to the author's relationship to the contemporary literary scene and its journalistic orientation. Ogai's biographical works stand on their own as the unique artistic achievement of a giant of modern Japanese literature and culture. They also constitute a brilliant critique of a society that had lost touch with its traditional values. Marcus' reading of a literature often considered "inaccessible" or "elitist" will be relevant to the study of Japanese literature and history as well as to the craft of biographical research and of journalistic conventions that influence writers - in Japan as elsewhere.

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