The Heritage of Courtly Love in Japanese Society

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There was a phenomenon in Japanese classical civilization that may properly be called courtly love. Courtly love in Japan was a special phase in an interest in and affirmation of romantic love that long predated it and has long survived it. Courtly love in Japan gave rise to a body of literature of great volume and high interest which occupies a key position in the structure of Japanese civilization.

In speaking of the tradition of courtly love in Japan, it is first necessary to make clear that it is not a mere variation of the European phenomenon. The Japanese version stands on an affirmation of romantic love that goes back to the beginning of Japanese history. Its classic form appeared among the Japanese court aristocracy between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. Its characteristic expression was in poetry and it was a literary convention related to but not identical with the real-life experience of love. The convention was reflected in prose fiction as well, but here the portrayals were more varied and complex.

The key role that romantic love played during the time that the Japanese sensibility was taking shape is one of the outstanding characteristics of Japanese civilization. It is the overriding importance of the feminine point of view that distinguishes the treatment of romantic love in classical Japanese literature. Donald Keene has pointed out that it was the tone set by the earliest women poets that later established the norm for both men and women in poetic expression.

The theme of love plays a prominent role in the earliest accounts of Japanese society. Robert Brower and Earl Miner give us some charming examples in their study of Japanese court poetry. Donald Philippi has introduced the English reader to many other attractive and sympathetic lovers. Deities and mortals, high-born and commoners, all are found in these episodes. Verse was an in-
dispensable part of courtship as well as of mature relationships and from the very beginning women had important speaking parts in love stories.

In the old records there is frequently mentioned a kind of fertility or harvest festival called utagaki or ‘poetry gathering,’ which was held in the spring and fall. The participants were divided into men’s and women’s teams to exchange extemporized poetry in a series of individual contests. We have little surviving poetry that can definitely be identified as coming from the utagaki which were, after all, a preliterate institution, but they seem to have been frank and even bawdy, since a good exchange often was the starting point for a short or long term intimacy. All that we know of archaic Japanese society leads us to feel that women were unlikely to feel themselves constrained to hide their true feelings, whether they be positive or negative. A double standard of morality was as yet unknown to this society. There was, thus, no reason for any a priori assumption that free expression on the part of women would necessarily be hostile to the social order.

The utagaki are only one of many indications that in early Japan romantic love was accepted as a completely natural part of human experience and that poetry played a role in romantic love. The Manyōshū, the oldest existing anthology of Japanese poetry, gives a prominent position to the theme of love, yet the compiling of the Manyōshū was in part an emulation of official Chinese anthologies in which love poetry had no place at all. Love poetry had to be in the Manyōshū, because this Japanese anthology was informed by a desire to preserve the essence of Japanese civilization which then seemed to be on the verge of being swept away beneath the richness and prestige of Chinese culture. It was a very earthly kind of love that was spoken of in these old poems; a love that could be the occasion of playfulness or the most intense joy, but never a guarantee of lasting happiness. The Japanese saw love not as a solution to life’s problems but rather as one of the most important of life’s problems. The main consideration was not whether the experience of love was happy or not but rather how the individual defined himself or herself through the experience of love.

Japanese culture has always tended to emphasize the experiential. It has also tended to define experience in terms of its emotional component. Love has a wonderful ability to concentrate the emotions, and in a society where women were full participants at
the very least, there was no stigma attached to men being powerfully affected by the women they knew. In most cases we find ourselves looking right past the men at the women themselves. It is in the very biological nature of things that in the game of romantic love, especially in the absence of modern medical science, women are going to be playing for the higher stakes. This means that the emotional experience of women in love may be expected to have a greater clarity and intensity. It follows quite naturally therefore that women might be expected to have the more interesting and significant things to say about the experience of love.

In classical Japanese literature many, perhaps a majority, of the people, both writers and fictional characters, whose humanity we may experience are women. It is not a one-sided matter by any means. Men are better represented among the poets, at least in sheer numbers. Men are about equally numerous as fictional characters but far less numerous as writers of prose during the great age of classical literature. It is the women and the fictional characters they created, the people they observed, or the created speakers of their poems that are at the forefront of the models of humanity presented to us by classical Japanese civilization. The importance of the feminine model of humanity in classical Japanese court culture is underlined by the fact that major masculine poets writing during the full maturity of classical civilization were likely, when writing on the subject of love, to create poems in which the speakers were women.7

Brower and Miner, the first to write systematically about Japanese courtly love in a Western language, have traced the conventionalized course of love in the imperial anthologies. There is first an awakening awareness of the beloved, usually through rumor, very rarely through sight; then an exchange of letters in which the quality of handwriting, the placement of the letter on the page, the kind of writing paper selected, and the way in which the letter is presented are crucial in determining whether the intrigue is to be pursued further. At this stage the man fears that he will not be successful and the woman that the man may not be sincere or that she might become involved in a scandal. Next comes the consummation, which is followed next morning by an exchange of poems, as are subsequent secret meetings. After a time the man’s interest begins to cool and finally the woman is left to sorrow, resentment, or despair, states in which were written the most powerful and moving love poems.8
This convention probably had about as much and as little to do with the way that real-life love affairs actually proceeded in Japan as the literary conventions of other societies had to do with their actual experiences. Yet in Japan, as in the West, older aristocratic conventions of love are the ultimate although often unrecognized source of many of the postures and nuances that determine the current tone of relationships between the sexes and of the culture as a whole. The European version of courtly love is well known although a subject of continuing controversy. A systematic comparison of the Japanese and European traditions would take us too far from our subject, but a quick review of some of the major similarities and contrasts can be helpful.

The most obvious quality that the two traditions of courtly love had in common is that they were both products of courtly society and both only gradually diffused into their respective civilizations. Even so, differences in the two civilizations and in the way in which court and commoners related to each other in Europe and in Japan place many limitations on the significance of the analogous class origins. For one thing, the non-aristocratic troubador who played a notable role in the development of the European conventions had no real counterpart in Japan, where it was the aristocrats themselves who were both the sole producers and the sole consumers of literature. Again, the comparative ease with which courtly standards could be used as models by non-aristocratic circles in Japan reminds us further of how different the two societies were and how different from each other were their stances in defining and acting out the life of refinement.

One more thing that the two cultures had in common was that in dealing with romantic love they both placed emphasis on love outside marriage. Here, too, the contrasts become at least as remarkable as the similarities. In the European tradition, marriage was the antithesis of romantic love. In Japan, most treatments of romantic love view marriage with indifference. The reasons for this indifference are too complex to review in full here, but they are neither so cold-blooded nor so amoral as they appear at first sight. Women, for example, were speaking for themselves in Japan, whereas in Europe they were property to be kept secure or to be stolen, and they were usually without a voice of their own. The most striking contrast between the two traditions of courtly
love is to be found in the overwhelming influence of both the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian traditions in European courtly love and their absence in Japan. Here we come to the most fundamental differences in values. In Japan, romantic love between men and women was an accepted natural phenomenon, and there was in Japanese culture a marked tendency to equate the natural with the pure, the beautiful, and the good. There was no marked difference between the sexes insofar as relationship with the divine was concerned and what difference there was tended to be in the woman’s favor in Shinto, to be ambiguous in Japanese Buddhism, and to be in the man’s favor in Confucianism.9

Japanese courtly love had a matter-of-fact element of carnality. The concern both in literature and in life was to express that carnality within rigorously prescribed boundaries of taste and decorum. But in Europe the fear of and contempt for women that came out of the classical heritage was reinforced by the disgust for carnality that had grown out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Physical love could be accepted only as a metaphor or an allegory. Only the minimum degree of carnality necessary to maintain the species was tolerated and anything beyond that was adultery, regardless of whether it occurred within marriage or without. An elaborate metaphysical apparatus was developed to enable the poet not only to argue, but to believe himself that his talk of love was purged of carnality. The antithesis of flesh and spirit placed the troubador under constraints and tensions that were not shared by the Japanese courtier. The particular genius of the troubadors may be said to lie in the graceful way in which they reconciled the irreconcilable.10

The poets of courtly love in Europe were in tension with Christian standards and with many of the elements in their tradition that predated Christianity. Christianity in general was far more negative about women than even the most extreme statements of Japanese Buddhism, and the European paganism that preceded Christianity had already been intensely antagonistic to women. In Shinto, the Japanese analogue of European paganism, women were generally in a favorable position. Even in the pantheon, the sun goddess occupied the highest position. The Japanese imperial dynasty, the longest lived in human history, has traditionally based its legitimacy on descent from the sun goddess, Amaterasu, that is to say, from a female ancestor.

Classical Mediterranean civilization viewed passionate attach-
ment by a man to a woman as both ludicrous and pitiful if only because it necessarily involved taking the woman far more seriously than she, being a woman, could ever possibly merit. Such a love was also dangerous because a man in the throes of infatuation was likely to behave in irrational ways that could threaten the social order. Insofar as the woman could act effectively at all, she was always a threat to the patriarchal order. While Christianity placed some constraints on the more extreme expressions of such negative attitudes, it tended at the same time to impose entire new orders of disability on women.

Any overall judgments that might be drawn from such a quick comparison are far less simple and straightforward than the unwary might take them to be, and this is not the place to attempt them. There is room, however, for the observation that romantic love did not and could not be expected to find a comfortable home among the social and religious values of medieval and renaissance Europe but that it was an essential part of classical Japanese civilization. The tension between romantic love and the existing order arose in Japan only later, primarily as a consequence of the more complete assimilation of Confucian values into the society, and it did not become dominant until the seventeenth century. This tension was a part of the Mediterranean civilizations for as long as we know anything about them.

The final contrast between European and Japanese courtly love is in a way the most basic of all because it subsumes most of the preceding contrasts. It lies in the importance of the feminine voice and the feminine point of view in the classical Japanese outlook. The feminine literary personality in the Japanese court was not merely unthreatening to the social order. She was playing a crucial role in defining the character of that order.

It is perhaps not surprising that there should be fundamental differences between the attitudes toward romantic love and its attendant literary conventions in Europe and Japan. An equally interesting question may be that of the relationship to Chinese ideas.

Romantic love was not, of course, unknown in classical China. The *Shih Ching*, compiled in the fifth century B.C., contains a considerable amount of love poetry. More than two thousand years of subsequent commentary have, however, persisted in explaining away the erotic elements as political allegory, with the suitor as the
minister and the beloved the emperor. In official Chinese civilization, romantic love was beyond the pale and it was almost exclusively official Chinese civilization the Japanese first came to know. None of the later poetic anthologies of the Chinese literary canon dealt with romantic love at all, except when it co-existed with some issue of state. Its place was taken by the theme of friendship between men and the poets were, with few exceptions, male. China under Confucianism was an intensely patriarchal society and romantic love therefore was always a dangerous subject. If the elemental fear and loathing of the female that underlies so much of European culture is not conspicuous in China, the place defined for women by Confucianism was a perpetually subordinate one rarely afforded opportunities for women to distinguish themselves in any positive way in the world beyond the family.¹⁴

The story of Yang Kuei-fei, the concubine of the emperor Hsuan-tsung of T'ang, and the way it was received in China and in Japan offers ready access to the profound spiritual difference between these two civilizations. In Japan, Yang Kuei-fei was viewed sympathetically. In China, she is an archetype of the beautiful woman as threat to the social order. Her story has its classical telling in The Everlasting Wrong (Ch'ang Hen Ke) of Po Chü-i. The opening lines introduce the essential elements of the story:

The lord of Han, fond of beauty, wanted the perfect one. He searched far and wide but he could not find her. Then, there appeared in the house of Yang a maid just come of age. Reared in the inner chambers, still unknown to the world. Her beauty was a gift from heaven, too rare to be wasted. And so, one morning, she was chosen for the emperor's side. Her glance, her smile excelled the charms of hundreds; Those in the harem now found beauty and wiles ignored. In the cool of spring, she bathes in Hua-ching pond; The warm waters caress her perfect flesh. Attendants lift her out, all sensuousness and langour, She is ready now to receive the imperial favor. Hair like a cloud, face like a flower, ornaments aquiver: Warm within lotus curtains the spring night passed. Darkness was too short; they arose beneath a sun already high. From that day on, the emperor no longer held early audience.¹⁵
The emperor, obsessed with his love, neglected his duties, placed her relatives and favorites in high offices, and permitted the nation to fall into disorder. At last a rebellion broke out. The imperial armies were driven from the capital. They soon refused to serve the emperor any further so long as Yang Kuei-fei remained alive. The emperor was forced to accede and his beloved was hanged with one of her own silken scarves from a pear tree alongside the road. The emperor went on into exile, a broken man.

For our purposes it is necessary only to consider two aspects of this work. The first is that the point of view is narrowly and unfailingly masculine throughout. We gain powerful impressions of Yang Kuei-fei’s sensuousness and beauty, her warmth and her laughter, but we are provided with virtually no sense of the human being who lived behind those surface manifestations.

The second aspect, which follows directly from the first, is that Yang Kuei-fei is threatening to the social order precisely because she is so supremely desirable. That threat comes not from what she does so much as from what she is. Here the European will find himself on somewhat familiar ground, although it is difficult to find European parallels for the sheer power of Yang Kuei-fei’s beauty to bring national grief much later than Helen of Troy.

The Greek picture of the absolute danger posed by every woman who was outstanding in any way other than as a model of negative virtue has been put this way by Maruice Valency:

Far from creating a literature in praise of the beauty of women, the classical writers did what they could to mobilize the aggressions of society against the female component. Scorn was the keynote of their chorus, rather than the disgust of the patristic writers, but there is much in Greek literature to bear witness to the fear which underlay this scorn. Both in comedy and in tragedy, most official of the Greek genres, women were depicted as enemies of the rational order of society. In Clytemnestra, Medea, Phaedra, and Antigone we see nothing of the passive attitudes considered suitable to the Athenian lady, and in fact none of these heroines is Athenian. Such women were traditionally depicted as passion’s slaves; whosoever loved them came to grief. They had in addition a dangerous sense of having been unjustly treated and they bore mankind a grudge.  

Or again:

The extremes to which Aeschylus went in minimizing the value of women to society would make one smile if one did not remember what an extraordinary development this attitude was to have in Western culture.
Women in China did not have to bear quite such a terrifying burden of scorn, fear, and disgust as in Europe, but their position nevertheless had much more in common with classical Europe than with classical Japan.

The fact that Po Chü-i is, although not the greatest Chinese poet, the one who seems to travel best, and had already become the most widely read and quoted Chinese poet in Japan more than a thousand years before he became the first well-known Chinese poet in Europe, provides the opportunity to make our comparison. Japan’s greatest work of literature, The Tale of Genji, begins with a love story that its author, the woman known to us as Murasaki Shikibu, develops in part through reference and allusion to Po Chü-i’s telling of the story of Yang Kuei-fei. To Murasaki, these two stories are quite similar. To the modern reader, the differences are far more striking than the similarities. In fact, the similarities she perceived now seem for the most part dependent upon a startling re-interpretation of the story of Yang Kuei-fei. Both internal and external evidence show that this was not due to an idiosyncratic reading of Po Chü-i by Murasaki, but that this and other Chinese poems on similar themes were consistently read this way in Japan.

In the first chapter of The Tale of Genji, Kiritsubo, a lady of great charm and beauty, but of low rank and without strong backing at court, has won the emperor’s favor. This has aroused the hatred and jealousy of those other court ladies who had assumed that their higher rank would give them precedence. (It is well to recall that although the Heian court drew extensively on Chinese models, the institution of the imperial harem was not introduced into Japan and that the ladies in service at court were in many ways among the freest members of Japanese court society.) Heedless of the disorder and dissension in the palace, the emperor continued to favor Kiritsubo above all others. In time a beautiful prince was born to them. This prince is Genji, the central figure of the novel. Kiritsubo is even more fiercely persecuted by her rivals. The emperor is unable to protect her and she is literally harassed to death by the other court ladies.

In telling this story, Murasaki constantly refers to The Everlasting Wrong. Both Kiritsubo and Yang Kuei-fei are presented as sympathetic figures who are destroyed by the very beauty that has raised them so far above their original stations, a complete reversal of the Chinese reading. One searches Po Chü-i’s text in vain for the slightest hint of such an idea.
It is this difference between the outlooks of Po-Chü-i and Murasaki Shikibu that is diagnostic in identifying them as products of Chinese and Japanese culture respectively. In travelling from China to Japan the story of Yang Kuei-fei has undergone a sea change in which the point of view shifts from masculine to feminine. This shift leads directly to the second major contrast in the two treatments. To the Japanese, the beauty and desirability of each of the leading female characters is no longer a threat to society as a whole but rather a terrifyingly ambiguous gift to its possessor. It is the personal story, the inner history, of Yang Kuei-fei that aroused Japanese interests and engaged Japanese sympathies. This part of the story was a matter of indifference in China. The change in perception may in part be traced to the different genders of the two writers, but what is more significant is that the feminine point of view became the standard one for Japan.

The young Prince Genji grows up to become the embodiment of the male idea of Heian court society: high social rank, physical beauty, exquisite social grace and skill, outstanding as a poet, a calligrapher, a musician, a dancer, a blender of incense, and all the other elegant accomplishments of a society which, in Sir George Sansom’s phrase, “made religion into an art and art into a religion.” However, as one who represents Heian ideals, Genji must first of all be a sensitive, accomplished, and indefatigable lover. In this role, he is constantly brought into the company of women who are every bit as refined and accomplished as he: embodiments in their turn of the feminine ideal. In her novel, Murasaki soon begins to explore these encounters between ideal men and ideal women and their all too frequently unhappy outcomes. As she does so, she develops solidly realistic literary techniques that were founded in the native values that made the early Japanese so fully at home in this world.¹⁸

The fictional world presented at the beginning of Genji seems to differ from the real world in which Murasaki lived primarily in the lesser number of obstructions it offered to the realization of classical Japanese ideals. This enables her to focus on the fact that even the most complete realization of these ideals is somehow unlikely to occasion happiness. In spite of the elegance and sensitivity of Genji, the lives of the women around him fall into a narrow range running from the relatively secure at the cost of painful and humiliating compromises, to the disastrous. In the long run, Genji’s endless romantic adventures fail even as a source of joy to
him. He is trapped in a pattern of exploitation and betrayal by the very process of acting out the ideals of his society. He is only partially aware of this paradox, but even partial awareness is a constantly growing threat to the good opinion of himself that defines the center of his being. He is sensitive, well-meaning, and genuinely enthusiastic about the ladies to whom he makes love. At first he seems to cherish the naive assumption that he is, among other things, rewarding them for their excellence by making them the precious gift of himself. The gift is permanent; he never abandons any woman with whom he has been involved. Still, that gift of his person which he values so highly, and which the society in which he lives admires so unreservedly, does not usually prove to be an unmixed blessing for the recipient. Genji’s later years are marked by increasing desperation and emptiness and by an appalling erosion of his always limited ability to be honest with himself.

*The Tale of Genji* is, of course, no simple morality tale, but it involves moral issues. The Buddhist side of Japanese culture does prepare one to believe that pursuit of worldly satisfaction is inescapably self-defeating. The Confucian side would inveigh against the selfish and anti-social implications of such a pursuit. But the Shinto or native world view, the world view which underlies most of the reflexes of Heian (and modern) Japan, suggests that great beauty, if not the highest value in itself, is at least inseparable from excellence and goodness. The things that seem good in this world are good, so very good that only the most refined and disciplined sensibility can know how good. Yet the beautiful and privileged are not happy even though they have everything that their world can offer them.

In her approach to the solution of this paradox, Murasaki reminds us by implication how the native tradition has combined and interacted with certain tenets of Buddhist thought to suggest that it is not after all this world itself that is the source of suffering, but rather the holding of illusions and misapprehensions about this world. With this formulation, Buddhism then may be thought to be simply rephrasing Shinto’s pollution theory of evil in a more sophisticated way. The salvation through beauty that Shinto seemed ready to posit as the next step may actually be possible and Buddhist salvation may come on Shinto terms.

If the source of suffering lies not in this world itself but in misapprehensions of this world, if this reconciliation of Shinto and
Buddhist perceptions really is valid, then the apparent ambiguity of the gift of personal beauty may be just such a misapprehension. One of the most serious practical conflicts between the Shinto and Buddhist world views is then resolved.

By the end of *The Tale of Genji*, the Lady Ukifune seems to have acted out just such a resolution. Although Ukifune is far more than a simple marker in a religious allegory, her experience raises many questions, and makes it possible to believe that beauty may be a boon after all, just as instinct would suggest. The good that beauty brings is not, however, good in the puerile sense of the beautiful princess being carried away by Prince Charming to live happily ever after. Instead, Ukifune’s beauty forces upon her such an intense course of experience that she is brought to an epiphany. She has had to confront the correctness of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths in a bleak and direct way, such as could have come to less fortunate people only much later if at all.

The problem of salvation through beauty is a central one throughout Japanese history. It underlies the entire theme of romantic love and helps give it its place in the larger scheme of things. We have to rely on implicit rather than explicit expressions of the idea of salvation through beauty. The classic Japanese were not so much people who failed to make systems as they were a people who carefully and conscientiously avoided making them.

If a long-range concern in *Genji* is with this problem of salvation through beauty, much of its immediate concern is with the workings of a society that operated under a code of esthetics rather than of morals.

This consideration of some of the salient characteristics of Japanese court literature and of *The Tale of Genji* involves us with three interlocking questions concerning courtly love in Japan: the role of women in Japanese society, the problem of salvation through beauty, and the evolution of the institution itself. One of the most rewarding ways to trace these is through the expression of each of them in poetry.

Up to the middle of the sixth century, we may speak of primitive Japanese verse, composed to be recited and written down only by chance, usually after a period of oral transmission. By the late seventh century, Japanese verse was coming into its first maturity as a part of a written literature and from the very first we hear women speak clearly and distinctly in their own voices.
When we come to early historical times, we find that women usually lived at the home of their parents, at least until they had children, and although the children of high-ranking aristocrats were generally married off for political reasons, there seems to have been a remarkable degree of freedom for both sexes in the rest of society. The young wife would normally be meeting her husband on her home territory rather than on his and she was not as a rule economically dependent on him; in fact, the reverse seems not to have been unusual. The woman thus held the power of the latch-string against any lover or husband and in both literature and life she would first of all be expressing her own true feelings, for these feelings would never be inconsistent with her social role. By Heian times these institutions were in decline and the woman's position had become less secure.

By the time of the compilation of the Manyōshū in the middle of the eighth century, there was already a long established tradition of women poets and, for all the brilliance of the great male poets, writing in both longer and shorter forms, it was, as has already been noted, the women whose manner, subject matter, and preferred form, the classical thirty-one syllable tanka, that set the course of future development in Japanese court poetry. Lady Ōtomo of Sakanoe was one of these poets and early in the second third of the eighth century we find her saying this:

Koi koite
Aeru toki da ni
Uruwashiki
Koto tsukushite yo
Nagaku to omoeba.

If you long
For my love then at least,
When we are able to meet
Say all the pretty things you know
If you want our love to last.24

Perhaps a decade or so after Lady Ōtomo was writing this, a certain Lady Kasa, in a group of poems that contains all we know about her, sent twenty-four love poems to Ōtomo no Yakamochi,
the nephew of Lady Ōtomo and himself one of the great poets of the age. One of the Lady Kasa’s poems was this:

Ise no umi no
Iso mo todoro ni
Yosuru nami
Kashikoki hito ni
Koiwataru kamo!

Ise’s seas’
Wild shores thunderingly
Approaching waves
Are awesome person.
How I long for him!  

The English has deliberately been left in a jagged condition in order to preserve the original order of the images. Even so the breathtaking syntactical sleight-of-hand by which the poet makes the powerful image of great waves pounding on a wild shore apply directly to her feeling for her beloved is pretty much lost as is the tension generated by waiting until the end of the fourth line in a five line form to let the reader know what the poem is about. This is a poem of intense, even violent passion, expressed in correct form and diction, but without the slightest trace of inhibition.

By the latter half of the ninth century, Ariwara no Narihira and Ono no Komachi were establishing the ideal masculine and feminine types in the poetry of courtly love. Narihira was a great lover who handled his affairs with grace, delicacy, and, of course, with poetry. His ability to express his feelings about each occasion in elegant, moving, and formally correct verse made him a model for the Heian courtier and for aspiring poets of later ages.

Narihira has been properly admired and emulated by Japanese poets throughout the past eleven centuries, but it is the poetry of Ono no Komachi that the modern reader is likely to find the more impressive once he fights past the linguistic barriers. Komachi was constantly testing the limits of rhetorical complexity in her verse. A sense of great risks taken and surmounted distinguishes her finest poems, and much of their excitement comes from seeing her main-
tain perfect control where any control at all has begun to seem out of the question:

Hito ni awan
Tsuki no naki ni wa

Omo(h)iokite
Munēnashiribi ni
Kokoro yake-ori.

Wanting to meet my lover and
Weeping as this moonless night provides no chance,
My love, blazing up, awakens me,
My breast heaves and in its running
Flames, my heart chars.

This poem is untranslatable, even beyond the well-known difficulties in translating classical Japanese verse. The extreme discrepancy in length between the original and my English version, which is more paraphrase than translation, suggests part of the problem. There is much more, however, that space will not permit us to consider here and in the end any English version fails most of all in conveying the extraordinary fire-and-ice quality of turbulent emotions presented in exquisite and classically perfect diction and form.26

In the poems of Komachi we first hear fully and clearly the voice of the woman writing in the tradition of courtly love. She is positive about her feelings, strongly moved to express them, and her manner is a blend of discipline and elegance with freedom and spontaneity in accord with the finest ideals of court society.

With Komachi, again, we know almost nothing except for the poems surviving in the Kokinshū. The details of her life seem to have been lost quite early, but she is so important in subsequent Japanese civilization that an elaborate set of legends has grown up about her. Sometime around the end of the Heian period, a poem in Chinese entitled “The Vicissitudes of the Jewel-fashioned Komachi,” (Tamazukuri Komachi Shōsuisho),27 which, although it almost certainly has nothing to do with the actual life of the poet,
was written to satisfy a demand for knowledge about her, even if it had to be invented.

The active repertoire of the Nō theatre draws on both the poetry and the legend of Komachi in the five plays in which Komachi is the dominant figure. These include Komachi at Sekidera and Sotoba Komachi. Both of these plays, wherein the protagonist has demonstrated her preeminence as a human being through her greatness as a woman and as a poet, present Komachi as the figure of supreme wisdom.

In both plays, Komachi is one year short of a hundred years of age. In Sotoba Komachi she is an old beggar woman who sits down to rest on what proves to be a stupa or Buddhist monument. She is promptly taken to task by two well-meaning but officious priests of the Shingon sect, who condescendingly set about to explain to her the nature of her offense. They call upon the metaphysical and esoteric knowledge that is the special province of their sect, but they are soon brought up short by the casual brilliance of Komachi’s replies. Completely overwhelmed, they ask her who she is. Komachi then sings of the wretchedness of her present state, of her lost beauty, her lost wealth, and her lost social position.

It becomes apparent that Komachi is a fully-enlightened person who remains in this world only by choice. The instrument of her enlightenment has been her losses in the world. Anyone might lose wealth, anyone might lose social status, but Komachi was also once a young woman of supreme beauty. She has become the wisest because she has had the most to lose. It is loss that makes us aware of the ephemeral character of earthly joys; the corollary is that awareness is not likely to come to those who have nothing to lose. Again, great beauty proves to be a boon when viewed on a universal scale, however ambiguous the gift may seem from the point of view of everyday life. The Buddhist-Shinto reconciliation is achieved, and it is demonstrated not only that women are capable of attaining salvation, a proposition about which there are difficulties in some strains of Buddhism, but that women actually have a special advantage. This proposition could not be other than reassuring to members of a culture still deeply rooted in a religion, Shinto, which has a sun goddess at the apex of its pantheon.

Komachi at Sekidera gives us the same old woman, but this time she imparts special wisdom on the art of Japanese verse, bringing us into that central realm of the traditional Japanese consciousness.
where religious and esthetic experience illuminate each other. It is the most prestigious of No plays, performed no more than once or twice a generation and only by an actor recognized as one of the best of his time and who is then at the height of his powers. Its prestige comes from both its subject matter and the extraordinary demands of the title role. Its subject is transcendental wisdom, and the fact that the possessor of that wisdom is an aged woman is completely natural in the Japanese context. It is impossible within the traditional Japanese world view to imagine a play of this nature with Narihira, Komachi's male counterpart, as the protagonist. Also completely natural in the Japanese context is the lesson given that an essential part of wisdom lies in recognizing and enjoying the simple pleasures that this world has to offer.

In summary, if the good things of this world are in fact good in themselves, they are good also because they first move us deeply and then abandon us, thus bringing us to an awareness of the transitory nature of earthly satisfactions. There is, therefore, nothing to be gained by the cultivation of negative virtue. Negative virtue is a form of dishonesty because it can only isolate us from experience and experience is the only source of meaning. With this as a point of departure common sense is reaffirmed and great physical beauty and social elegance come clearly and unambiguously into their own as among the greatest goods which life can offer because of their ability to enrich and intensify experience. These attributes are useful not only to their owners but to the less endowed to whom their possessors may serve as models who, by their very freedom from most worldly disabilities, enable us to focus on the hopelessness of clinging to this world. Experience is the ultimate teacher and in universal terms it matters little whether the experiences seem pleasant or unpleasant at the time.

There is no great news for people who are products of European culture in the fact that a great male poet has had an influence on subsequent generations. There is news when we say that a great female poet has not only been influential in the field of serious literature but has become a part of the very folklore of the culture and an archetype of much that is most positive in that culture. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that Komachi is not alone and isolated as a great female figure but simply the first among many; her priority itself is immediately open to challenge if we alter the criteria only slightly.
Examples could be multiplied almost without end from other Japanese literature. There are the women poets, essayists and novelists from the Heian period and countless characters from fiction and drama. In *The Tale of the Heike*, the great Japanese military epic of the Kamakura period whose subject is the final dominance of the military and the patriarchal in Japanese civilization after the late twelfth century, many of the most memorable characters are women. The colorful but self-destructive qualities of Taira Kiyomori, the main character, are introduced by showing how he psychologically brutalizes his mistresses. Love stories constitute a large portion of the works of the seventeenth-century novelist Ihara Saikaku, and the initiators of romantic adventures in these stories are usually women. In the works of his near-contemporary, the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon, it is more often than not the female characters who are most fully realized, not only in the domestic dramas but even in the heroic period pieces.30

During the Tokugawa period, there arose a conviction which pairs the strong, resourceful, and active woman (whose strengths do not guarantee her happiness any more than they did her Heian ancestors) with the weak, passive, almost empty man. The pairing nearly dominates popular fiction and almost any of the works of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, or many of those of Kawabata Yasunari, to name only two authors who happen to be known in the West, would provide examples on a more serious level. Virtually all works dealing with the demimonde over the past three hundred years deal with such a pairing. In real life it has been observed that calf-love in Japan finds the girl playing much the same role that the boy plays in American high school romances: saving choice seats, presenting candy and sweetmeats, even giving flowers.

As we look back over the long span of Japanese literature we see that romantic love, formalized during one period as a very special variety of courtly love, has been a prime concern of Japanese literature and of the civilization that produced it. This romantic love depended on two things for the qualities that made it specifically Japanese. The first is a responsible and active role in Japanese civilization for women, particularly at the beginning, and the second is an intense concern with the individual human being, for romantic love is first of all an advocacy of the claims of the individual against the claims of society. Yet these two qualities are precisely the ones most specifically excluded from the popular
stereotypes of Japanese civilization, even those held by many Japanese.

It is necessary after all this to emphasize that Japan is not now nor has it ever been a paradise for women, probably rating little if any better than Europe on the overall score, that it has been patriarchal during most of recorded history, although that patriarchalism was different from our own, that the individual has suffered conspicuous restrictions in Japanese society, and that there has been an extremely productive masculine literary culture. But none of these facts can be considered without running the danger of serious distortion unless the kinds of facts reviewed here are considered at the same time. Women in Japan have had, in spite of all, certain relative advantages in the way in which they perceived themselves and in the way in which they were perceived by men. Their central role in defining high culture in Japan gave them some residual leverage even in times of the worst patriarchal excesses. The importance of romantic love and of women writers on that subject cannot be accepted without also accepting at least to some degree the equal and complementary humanity of men and women.

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NOTES

1 Many of the early accounts and myths deal with the theme of love and many of these encounters are consonant with romantic love. See Donald Philippi, translator, *Kojiki* (Tokyo and Princeton, 1968), pp. 50-72, 104-112, 144-147, 156-158, 203-204, 244-245, etc. Although not every reader might include every one of the episodes cited under the heading of romantic love, there will remain a large number under the most rigorous definition.


4 Donald Philippi, *This Wine of Peace, This Wine of Laughter* (New York and Tokyo, 1968).

5 Examples are given under the heading for the Emperor Muretsu in the *Nihongi* while a closely related incident is listed as occurring in the reign of the Emperor Seinei in the *Kojiki*. See Phillipi, *Kojiki*, pp. 373-376, and W. G. Aston, *Nihongi* (London, 1896 and 1956), pp. 400-403. These give us little information about the institution but other sources such as early gazetteers and historical works, folk traditions and the like remove any doubt that such an institution existed. The festival was later adapted to court usage as a part of the primitivism often affected by the elegant aesthetics of the early court. There it seems to be one of the ancestors of the court poetry contests of Heian and later times. A useful summary of what little is known of *utagaki* is to be found in *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (Tokyo, 1972-
For translations from this anthology see *Manyōshū*, first published by the *Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai* in 1941 and reissued with an additional introduction by Donald Keene by Columbia University Press in 1965. For a critical exploration of the anthology, see Brower and Miner, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-156.

Keene, *op. cit.*, p. 31. At the beginning of the same essay (p. 26), Keene reminds us that “Although women poets and novelists were prominent between the eighth and twelfth centuries, hardly a woman writer of distinction appeared between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in modern Japanese literature the role of the woman has been relatively modest.” The present writer has no quarrel with any part of this observation. We are rather concerned here with the social and historical implications of this early importance of women writers. For a poem by Fujiwara Teika, written when he was seventy years old, in which the speaker is a young woman disappointed in love, see Earl Miner, *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford, 1968), p. 116.

Brower and Miner discuss the convention of courtly love in the introduction to their translation of Fujiwara Teika’s *Superior Poems of Our Time* (Stanford, 1967), pp. 35-36. Poems numbered 41 to 74 constitute a classic sequence in the conventions of courtly love.

The late Ivan Morris, in his landmark study of Heian society, has chosen to emphasize much more strongly the negative aspects of the position of women as defined by Japanese religious beliefs. His picture seems to call for modification on at least two points. First, he looks only at the Confucian and Buddhist aspects of the tradition, which, being alien and written, had much to do with the stated standards of Heian society, but he almost completely ignores the native tradition generally subsumed under the heading of Shinto and it was this latter that had very much to do with defining the actual standards by which society operated, against the pious wishes of the documentary tradition. Second, even in Buddhism itself there had been a steady strengthening of the position of women as the religion travelled eastward. Although the scriptural strictures against women that Morris cites can certainly be found in Buddhism, they were understated to a remarkable degree in classical Japan. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* (New York, 1964), pp. 121-2, 205. Joseph Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, (New York and London, 1966), although it does not directly deal with the position of women, repeatedly takes up the way in which Buddhism was modified by Shinto. See pages 69 and 85 for two examples.

“...there is no evidence that the quasi-religious tone of medieval love poetry has been transferred from the worship of the Blessed Virgin: it is just as likely—it is even more likely—that the coloring of certain hymns to the Virgin has been borrowed from the love poetry. Nor is it true in any unequivocal sense that the medieval church encouraged reverence for women at all: while it is a ludicrous error (as we shall presently see) to suppose that she regarded sexual passion, under any condition or after any possible process of refinement, as a noble emotion.” C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York, 1958), p. 8. Lewis also makes the statement (p. 4) that “French poets of the eleventh century, discovered or invented or were the first to express, that romantic species of passion which the English were still writing about in the nineteenth century.” He goes on to speak of the “impassable barriers” that this discovery raises between us and “the classical past and the Oriental present.” Although widely quoted, this statement is simply not true unless the definition of romantic love is so particularized as to approach perfect circularity.


from the cold correctness of the earlier Roman family to the corruption and debauchery of the later empire. In ascribing this latter to the increased legal, financial, and social independence of women, Carcopino adopts the tone of one required to rehearse the self-evident.

11Valency, op. cit., pp. 2, 3, 15, 20, 23, etc., etc.

There was a tradition of the learned woman and of the female exponent of the martial arts in China, neither of which have any exact parallels in Europe, but both were subjects of interest precisely because they did not conform to the expected role. The female martial hero occupies an immense role in the popular cultures of both China and Japan. She remains almost untouched by Western scholarship, a fact which is unbelievable, considering her great topicality. In Japan there were several authentic female martial heroes, of which the prototype is Tomoe, from The Tale of the Heike. Throughout medieval and early modern times, Japanese women of the military class were likely to be trained in the use of the naginata, a weapon consisting of a slightly curved sword blade about a foot and a half long on a wooden handle about four feet long. Its use depended on agility, skill, and presence of mind, rather than on strength. Although the Japanese sword was perhaps the most terrible instrument of its kind ever developed, there was a tradition among the sword-bearing classes that even the best swordsman had only two choices when confronted by a skilled and determined woman armed with a naginata: he could either run for his life or stay and be killed. One searches the records of European chivalry in vain for traces of a similar equalizer. A rather typical example of the female martial hero in eighteenth century popular Japanese culture would be that of Komatsu in Chikamatsu Monzaemon's The Battles of Coxinga, translated by Donald Keene, Major Plays of Chikamatsu (New York and London, 1961). I am indebted to Professor Alvin Cohen for what seems to be the only reference to the Chinese female martial hero in a western language: Wolfram Eberhard, "Foreigners and Foreign Wars in Chinese Folk Novels," Journal of the Folklore Institute, Indiana University, XII: 1 (1975), pp. 71-78.

12Unless otherwise credited, all translations from Japanese or Chinese are my own.

13Valency, op. cit., p. 11.

14Ibid., p. 12.

Alicia Orloff Matsunaga, "The Land of Natural Affirmation: Pre-Buddhist Japan," in Monumenta Nipponica XXI, (1967), pp. 203-209. Miner, Introduction, p. 13, notes that "Shintoism had its share of ritual taboos and defilements; nevertheless from it Japanese have derived a pleasure in their world, a sense of being really at home in it, that people of few other countries can know." It is this sense of being at home in the world that led to accepting what happened in it and therefore to a convention of literary realism.

15Ukifune's epiphany, which brings her the greatest blessing in the midst of the greatest sorrow and desperation, foreshadows much of medieval literature when the rise of the military forced even the most refined sensibilities to deal with sheer horror. The Nō theatre frequently treats of the epiphanies experienced by warriors when they are forced to confront directly and personally the true nature of their profession. Many of the medieval tales deal with the same kind of problem. See Donald Keene, Anthology of Japanese Literature (New York, 1955), pp. 286-293, for the Nō play Atsumori, and pp. 322-331 for the story, "Three Priests."


17See Brower and Miner, Japanese Court Poetry, pp. 42-50.

18Philippi, This Wine of Peace, pp. 12, 30.

Manyōshū IV: 661. For another translation, see number 395 of the translations cited in note 6, above.

Manyōshū III: 600. For another translation, see number 316 of the translations cited in note 6, above.

Kokinshū XIX: 1030. For a complete analysis of the poem, see Brower and Miner, Japanese Court Poetry, p. 206.

The entire poem, along with its Chinese language introductory essay, is given in the introduction to the text of Sotoba Komachi in Sanari, Kentaro, Yokyoku Taikan (Tokyo, 1954), text volume III, pp. 1716-1718.

There are two excellent translations of Sotoba Komachi: one by Arthur Waley, Nō Plays of Japan (London, 1921), and the other by Sam Houston Brock in the Keene Anthology, pp. 264-270. For Sekidera Komachi, see Donald Keene, Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre (New York, 1970), pp. 65-80.

There are four themes from the tradition that are drawn upon in this play. They are: (1) the poetry of Ono no Komachi; (2) the hundred nights' attendance (which was not discussed here); (3) the cycle of Komachi legends based on the Tamazukuri; and (4) the story, which appears in many different forms in the early literature, of an old woman, often a beggar, who puts learned priests to shame by the purity and soundness of her faith. In this play the tone is overwhelmingly one of conservatism, of affirmation of shared values. When the Nō theatre moves toward the core of shared values as it does in the Komachi plays, the high position of women is a proposition that will appeal to the most conservative sentiments.

See above, note 14.