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A Poet's Eye: Poems by Princess Shikishi

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A Poet's Eye: Poems of Princess Shikishi

“Spring”

So clearly I see
The first sign of springtime:
The color of the sunlight,
Rising above the snow
On Otowa's mountain peak.
[Zenshū 1]

On broken eaves
Thick with moss, I see
Spring has come,
And untouched by years the scent
Of plum blossoms close by.
[Zenshū 106]

An image of blossoms
Opens in my yearning heart,
As I await their time,
Till at last they are transplanted
To the slopes of Yoshino.
[Zenshū 211]

Come here and see!
Where blossom petals swirl
Down the slopes in Yoshino,
Carried by fierce winds
To my hut far beneath.
[Zenshū 116]

I see this morning
A breeze stir the treetops
Around my dwelling,
And on the ground so many layers
Of an unfamiliar snow.
[Zenshū 217]

Flowers all scattered,
Thoughts troubled, I gaze
After absent colors,
And from the empty sky
Fall spring showers.
[*Zenshū* 219 (SKKS 149)]

“Summer”

Close by my window
Bamboo leaves rustle,
Stirred by a breeze,
Making all the more fleeting
The dream as I dozed.
[*Zenshū* 314 (SKKS 256)]

As I gaze out,
Moonlight spread in my garden
Fades away,
Leaving only the fleeting glow
Of fireflies in the dark.
[*Zenshū* 28]

“Autumn”

Thoughts troubled, I weary
Of gazing and wish for a dwelling
Beyond autumn’s reach;
But does not the moonlight
Shine on all fields and mountains?
[*Zenshū* 248 (SKKS 380)]

No trace of footsteps
Remains in my garden
Where deep in low reeds,
Soaked in droplets of dew,
The song of waiting crickets.
[*Zenshū* 240 (SKKS 474)]

Fallen *paulownia* leaves too,
How hard now it would be
To walk among them—
But no matter, it is not as though
I was truly waiting for him.
[*Zenshū* 255 (SKKS 534)]

Do they bid farewell
To autumn that will not be stayed?
As I gaze out,
Fallen leaves in my garden
Drift off, all one way.
[*Zenshū* 55]

“Winter”

Winter approaches
Before my very eyes;
Where wild ducks swim
Along the shores of an inlet,
Spreads a thin layer of ice.
[*Zenshū* 259 (SKKS 638)]

As autumn rains fell,
Everywhere the colored leaves
All scattered,
And hailstones clatter
Beneath the trees in my garden.
[*Zenshū* 260]

It is always so—
The loneliness of my dwelling,
But I see it afresh
On frost that covers the leaves,
Fallen across my garden.
[*Zenshū* 59]

Imperial Princess Shikishi or Shokushi (Shikishi or Shokushi Naishinnô) was active as a poet near the end of the 12th century in Japan. She was the third daughter of Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127–1192). Her birth year is unknown, but she served as Kamo Priestess from 1159, resigned owing to illness ten years later, became a nun in 1197, and passed away in 1201. Despite leaving relatively few poems—fewer than four hundred in number, among which there are three, hundred-poem sequences—she is among the most celebrated poets of her time; *Shinkokinshû*, the royal anthology compiled soon after her death, includes nearly fifty of her verses, making her the second best represented poet in the collection and by far the best represented woman. I have chosen to translate a number of her seasonal compositions that display what I see as two interrelated features of many of her poems on seasonal topics—a focus on dwellings and their associated parts and explicitly on the speaker’s act of perceiving the world outside.

Before immediately concluding that Shikishi composes with a personal voice, it is important to remember that the vast majority of her verses were composed on set topics in hundred-poem sequences, where adherence to the established parameters of images and sentiment for each topic was required. Such sequences were no place for the expression of private emotions. Hundred-poem sequences, including the three in Shikishi’s personal collection, begin with poems of the four seasons, then love topics, and finally miscellaneous topics. The first signs of spring must be greeted with joy; cherry blossoms must be celebrated above all other flowers. “Blossoms” or “flowers” without further modification are always cherry blossoms, and contemporary readers would have readily recognized “unfamiliar snow” as a metaphor for fallen cherry blossom petals. Though moonlight and the bright hue of leaves are celebrated, deepening autumn and winter are times of loneliness and the fading of all things. Shikishi composes within these parameters.

In addition, the pose of a poetic speaker looking out into his or her garden and finding there a scene that conjures up mood is commonplace enough. For instance, a number of Shikishi’s poems may be read (though such a reading is not required) as invoking the common theme of the “waiting woman”—a woman waiting, usually in vain, for a lover’s visit. Thus the autumn poems beginning with *Zenshû* 248 may bring to mind such a woman through such lines as “Thoughts troubled, I weary,” “No trace of footsteps,” and “song of waiting crickets,” in which the name of the insect *matsumushi* contains the verb *matsu*, to wait. “Soaked in droplets of dew” may also suggest tears. The “Fallen *paulownia* leaves too” verse seems most clearly to summon up the theme, although the original speaks not of “him” but of *hito* (person, ungendered).

A number of Shikishi’s poems translated here also allude to earlier compositions by other poets, thus participating in a larger world of poetic meanings. Such allusions were a common practice in her day. To give several examples, Shikishi was most likely influenced in composing the *paulownia* verse by a love

poem (770) from the tenth-century royal collection, *Kokinshû*, that describes a garden path buried by leaves while the speaker awaited an unfaithful lover. Likewise, the spring poem “Come here and see” alludes to a *Kokinshû* miscellaneous poem (982), in which the speaker invites visitors to his hut at the foot of Miwa mountain. The spring poem “Flowers all scattered” alludes to a verse in episode 45 of *Tales of Ise*, but I feel it more closely mirrors the mood of Ono no Komachi’s famous *Kokinshû* spring poem (113) that invokes the fading colors of the blossoms and of the speaker’s own beauty while she gazes at the rain, time, and youth passing to no purpose. Shikishi also borrows the images of the bamboo and *paulownia* leaves from the Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772–846) in the “Close by my window” and “Fallen *paulownia* leaves too” compositions.

Thus Shikishi fully participates in the poetics of her time. And yet, so many of her compositions suggest a speaker living in solitude who gazes out into the world, often no larger than a garden, and who calls attention to separation from it by the insistence on barriers—dwellings, eaves, windows—and on the perceiving eye. In the first of the three hundred-poem sequences in Shikishi’s personal collection, twenty compositions of the seventy seasonal verses make reference to dwellings and gardens; in her second, nine; and in the third, twenty again. Likewise, in the first hundred-poem sequence, fifteen seasonal compositions among seventy employ verbs of visual perception; in her second sequence, the number is sixteen, dropping to thirteen in the third. Taken singly, Shikishi’s verses may not be unique, but as a body of work they summon up a poetic persona, more often than not isolated in a lonely dwelling and experiencing the world through visual perception. And those perceptions are often sharp and fresh—moonlight fading to be replaced by the glow of fireflies, fallen leaves drifting off all in one direction, the world of her garden contracting to the sound of hail beneath trees.

The seasonal compositions translated here date from the mid-1190s to 1200. I have arranged them not by date but by season, beginning with spring poems and ending with winter. When composing hundred-poem sequences or compiling anthologies, Japanese court poets were highly attentive to resonances between verses. Whatever resonances there are among the translated compositions are not those intended by Shikishi, but perhaps she would have found them interesting and revealing.