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The Love Letter Poetry Contest

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Cover Page Footnote

Japanese text can be found in Hagitani Boku and Taniyama Shigeru, eds., *Utaawase shû, Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 74, (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1976), pp. 263-270.

Roselee Bundy

The Love Letter Poetry Contest

康和四年内裏艶書歌合

Introduction and Commentary

The Love Letter Poetry Contest Held in the Japanese Imperial Court in 1102

On the second and seventh days of the intercalary fifth month of 1102, Emperor Horikawa hosted a poetry gathering, in which men and women poets exchanged love poems: this was the *Kōwa yonen urū gogatsu futsuka, dō shichinichi Dairi kesōbumi uta awase* (The Love Letter Poetry Contest Held on the 2nd and 7th Days of the Intercalary 5th Month of 1102 in the Imperial Court). On the first occasion—the 2nd day of the intercalary 5th month—the Emperor paired each of the poems the men had sent to the women declaring their love with a woman’s poem of rebuff. On the second occasion—the 7th day of the same month—they gathered again to hear the poems the women had sent to the men, voicing their resentment at their lovers’ neglect, and the men’s responses, justifying their behavior. On both occasions, a designated reader recited the poems.

These events are a fascinating intersection of two courtly practices: The first is the poetry contests held at the court, in which compositions on assigned topics by members of Left and Right teams were put into competition and often evaluated by a judge who determined a winner. Topics on love were also common in poetry contests and were frequently sub-divided into such specifics as love in a particular season or at a particular time of day—“parting at dawn,” for instance, or a certain stage of love: unrequited love” or “love after first meeting.” Lacking both judge and judgments as well as the clear designation of Left and Right teams, *The Love Letter Contest* should not, strictly speaking, be called a poetry contest, despite the name by which it is generally known. Still, it preserves the notion of two sides, each attempting best to fulfill the requirements of a topic and engaging in verbal competition, although in this case, the

poets do not compose on a shared topic but rather address each other.

The second practice that the contest invokes is the customary exchange of verses between lovers first during courtship, then at the consummation of the relationship, and, finally, at least in literature, the telling of the inevitable, bitter unraveling of the affair. The arrangement of compositions on love in the royal collections follows this narrative arc; poetry contest topics on love grow out of the same understanding of the narrative progression of love.

The Love Letter Contest stages two moments of a love affair, loosely borrowing the poetry contest format but with a nod towards realism, incorporating the actual exchange of poems, which were then, however, publicly recited. The two moments are, first, the beginning of the man's courtship and the woman's rejection of his interest, and second, the woman's laments as she sees the affair dissolving and the man's attempt to defend himself. Each stage has ten rounds of verse or twenty poems. Although it was not uncommon for men to write verse in the voice of a woman or vice versa, here the poets' gender performance and actual sex align, underscoring the pretense of reality. The poets, chosen from among the courtiers and retainers and women who served at court, included major poetic figures of the day. Among the women were Chikuzen (also known as Yasusuke Ô no haha) (who died after 1106 at probably over 90 years old) and Suhô no naishi (c. 1036–c. 1110). Both women were frequent participants in poetry contests and were well represented in the imperial collections. Most prominent among the male poets was Minamoto Shunrai or Toshiyori (c. 1055–c. 1129), arguably the most significant poet of the first half of the twelfth century. All would have been well aware of the customary emotional shape of a love affair and the sentiments appropriate to each stage.

The piquancy of the events must have been this pretense of love exchanges and the verbal sparring that it invited. And sparring it was, for the goal was to cleverly turn the words and images of one's correspondent against him or her, to the delight, in this case, of the assembled audience of the events, including the emperor himself. The translations below will show the poets' attention to properly staging their verses by for exam-

ple, carefully preparing the paper on which their missives were written. Entering fully into performance, Chikuzen even sent a poem, outside the scope of the contest, to the male poet who had also corresponded with Suhô no naishi, complaining of his inconstancy (*Yasusuke Ô no haha shû* 3). He played along and sent a response, vowing his love for her alone (*Yasusuke Ô no haha shû* 4). The contest thus was a stage of wit and play, and yet a number of its compositions were also chosen for inclusion among the volumes of love poems in subsequent royal collections as exemplary expressions of love.

I have translated below four exchanges each from the two events, choosing verses by the two prominent women poets as well as those by other poets that seemed to capture best the spirit of the events. Many of the poems allude to earlier compositions, or more precisely, the conventional significance of certain images, and where I felt a contemporary audience would have readily recognized such connotations, I have chosen to incorporate into the translation the understanding that a contemporary audience would have brought to the poem as a matter of course. The verses often also employ puns, which mostly are not visible as such in the translations. The language of the translation is more formal than colloquial. The verses were recited in the imperial court, and a certain formality seemed appropriate to this performative aspect. I employ the five-line translation format and attempt to keep the order of images, etc., of the original, insofar as the English is not distorted. No attempt is made to reproduce the 5-7-5-7-7 mora count of the originals. Finally, these verses seldom use personal pronouns, and my choice among the English first, second, or third persons was a matter of which seemed to fit the context the best. One comment on Chikuzen's poem of complaint to her faithless lover: A spider spinning its web was believed to portend a lover's visit. Finally, most of the male participants are identified by their court rank or post; I have translated these into English followed by the man's name. Court women of this period were identified and known by the household in which they served, their husband's or father's post, or familial affiliation—the daughter of so and so, mother of so and so, etc. These served as their names, and I treat them as such, leaving them untranslated.

I. The Love Letter Poetry Contest: 2nd day of the 5th month, 1102.

Hearing that the courtiers were composing poems in the court, Emperor Horikawa urged them to send poems declaring love to the women serving in the court, and so the men composed. On the 2nd day of the 5th month, the women's responses were received, beautifully ornamented, written on sheer paper with a design in accord with each poet's tastes.

Exchange 1

Major Counsellor Kinzane wrote:

My heart too full,
How shall I show her my longing?
A hidden spring
In a valley deep in the hills,
Pent up among stones.

Response by Suhō no naishi:

Why should it be
That my heart should be drawn
To the mountain stream,
Whose babbling voice reveals
The shallowness of his heart?

Exchange 2

The same Major Counsellor wrote on sheer crimson paper, rolled up in a wrapper twisted at the ends:

Though the years go by
And the log buried in the mud

Decays in silence,
Untouched by time will be
The love held deep in his heart

Response by Chikuzen:

Not deep at all
Rests the log in the dried out mud
Of Minase's riverbed.
Just so, no danger of his decay,
Though the years may go by.

Exchange 3

Consultant Middle Captain Tadanori wrote:

Weary of my thoughts,
I wander lost on the muddy path of love
With none to guide me
Save the steady flow of my tears
That runs on before me.

The response by Saki no saiin no Kii (or Settsu) was written on a crimson seven-layered paper on which was drawn a shoreline with reeds, attached to a silver sprig of garden rampion:

I shall not tread
That muddy path of love,
Nor read your notes,
And so what would I know
Of those flowing tears?

Exchange 4

Captain Toshitada wrote:

Unknown to her,
My thoughts rise like the wind
At Ariso beach,
Where waves draw near in the night,
I would draw near to tell of my love.

Response by Ichi no miya Kii:

I have often heard
Of those wayward waves
Of Takashi shore.
But they will not draw near to me
Lest my sleeves be drenched.

II. Follow-up event:

On the 7th of the same month, the emperor having notified the women who had received poems that they should write poems [of resentment], those poems were submitted.

Exchange 1

Chikuzen wrote:

Keenly awaited you are
As the song of the summer thrush,
And I seek each night
For a sign you will come to me,
Among the threads in a spider's web.

Response by the Major Counsellor:

Though the web augurs well,
Surely there are nights he does not sing,
That summer thrush.
Do not seek to know its resolve
In the activities of a spider.

Exchange 2

Suhō no naishi wrote:

He does not know
How drenched in dew are my sleeves.
So seldom we meet,
Unheeding, his heart withers away
Like grass shaded in the mountains.

Response by the Consultant Middle Captain:

The grass that grows
In shade deep in the mountains
Indeed will wither.
But I am become a weed
That clings nowhere but your eaves.

Exchange 3

Ichijō no Kii wrote:

Still wanting him,
Unable to stop from loving,

I thought perhaps in dream—
And in secret turned my night robe inside out,
But no comfort did I find.

Response by the Governor of Mimasaku:

Be not so ready to doubt,
Turning your robe inside out,
To conjure me,
A man single-minded in his love,
Who will never turn from you.

Exchange 4

Shijō no miya Kai wrote:

Not to my liking,
Till I learned of his coldness
Was this love of ours,
And now, though it makes no sense,
My tears have begun to fall.

Response by Minamoto Shunrai:

Should any man
Stand condemned in this way
For trivial absences?
It is not only your tears
That make no sense to me.

Source text:

Hagitani Boku and Taniyama Shigeru, eds. *Utaawase shū*, *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 74. Iwanami shoten, 1976, pp. 263–270.