

Waka in the Middle Ages of Japan
—Kenkō and Shōtetsu: In the Twilight of the Court Ages World—

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I

In general speaking on the history of Japanese poetry, we recognize that the Ancient Age (till 12th century) was the age of *Waka*, the Middle Ages (13th-16th) were the age of *Renga*, and the Pre-modern Age (17th-19th) was the age of *Haikai*. These general statements are true in the sense that each genre of poetry was born, came to maturity, and established its own style in each specific age. But *waka* remained prevalent in the Middle Ages and the Pre-modern Age, and did not lose its status as a main part of the poetry.

It is true that *waka* had an established style by the 11th century in court society and the world of court life. The genre of *waka* was established by the *Manyōshū* and the *Sandaishū*. However this was not the end of the history of *Waka*, but rather the beginning of the next stage in the history of *waka*.

From the end of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th, Japanese society underwent profound changes. The political power of the samurai was build by Minamoto Yoritomo. Japanese politic power had two focuses like an ellipse, the Court in Kyoto and the political center of samurai in Kamakura. This meant that the court lost its unrivalled monopoly on political power. It is in these circumstances that the third stage of *waka* history began. Poets were standing on the established world of *waka* and they thought those were classics for them. They thought these classics were the bonds of continence of Court life. The history of *waka* in the Middle Ages was just beginning.

Waka were the bonds of authentic Court life in the Middle Ages that came undone one by one. But the world to which they wanted to connect had changed from that of the Ancient court. I intend to discuss these characteristics while keeping in mind the 14th and 15th centuries.

II

“*Tsurezuregusa*” is one of the most famous essays in classical Japanese literature. Its author is Priest *Kenkō*. He was also a famous *waka* poet of the 14th century. He is one of the high-ranking pupils of Nijō Tameyo, the authoritative *waka* master. This paper will begin with a discussion of Chapter 28 of this essay.

Ryōan, the year after the Emperor’s death, is most tasteful year. The Royal Court

goes into mourning making for rather attractive scenery. The raised platform at the Emperor's palace was lowered and was surrounded by gray bamboo curtains whose tops were decorated with black cloth ornaments. The furniture of the Court was composed of rough things. The clothes, swords and ornaments of swords of the Court persons were used special ones.

Ryōan means the year in which Emperor goes into mourning for his father or mother. The Royal Court, which is usually gorgeous and full of colors, is instead decorated simple, with the only colors used being black and gray. This scenery suits Kenkō's aesthetics. He writes, "Man is attracted not only by the full moon or fully blooming flowers. Man feels more attracted to these things when he thinks about the moon in the rain, or about flowers in a closed room. (ch-137)"

When we stop to think about it, this attitude is not polite. *Ryōan* is a time for the Emperor to mourn for his father or mother. For Court nobilities, it is the time to mourn for the deceased Emperor or ex-Prince whom they knew closely. In the world of the *Sandaishū*, I recall one *waka* of "*Kokin-Wakashū*" by priest Henjō in my mind.

Mina Hito wa Hana no Koromo ni Narinunari

Koke no Tamoto yo Kawaki dani Seyo

All members of the Court change their dark mourning clothes to common flowery clothes. My dark priest sleeves, which are filled with tears from mourning the former Emperor, will not be dry at all.

This *Waka* has long preface by prose.

In the age of Emperor Fukakusa, I was a chief secretary of him. I closely served His Majesty everyday. After he passed, I did not go to Court office at all. And I climbed Mt. Hiei, and changed myself to priest at the temple. Next year, members of the Court returned to office wearing their mourning clothes no longer, and some of them rose up their positions by the command of new Emperor with joy. So I wrote this poem.

This was likely the real meaning of *Ryōan* in terms of Court life. Peoples' sadness when mourning His Majesty were so strong and deep. Human relationships existed behind. The reasons why the chief secretary became a priest were not only deep pure sadness but also the struggle for political balances. After all, that was a time of vivid complex personal relationships in real Court life.

In the old biographies of Kenkō, it is said that he became a priest due to the sadness he felt when mourning Emperor Gouda. But this biographical note is not true. Kenkō was born to nobility, but he had been out of Court for a long times.

III

We know now that the first reader of “*Tsurezuregusa*” was the 15th century *waka*-poet Priest Shōtetsu. He reveals in his essay deep response with Kenkō. And the handwritten manuscript of “*Tsurezuregusa*” by Shōtetsu is in Seikadō, a library of old books. It is the oldest known script of this essay. Kenkō’s words were inscribed so deeply in Shōtetsu’s mind that his behaviors were influenced. Kenkō’s musings of feeling beauty in a mourning Court were passed on to Shōtetsu.

Shōtetsu was not nobility. His ancestors were unknown. According to general biographical details, he was born in Okayama region, but there is no specific evidence for this clime. He mainly lived in Kyoto and had small houses in the urban district. The Royal Court was not part of his life.

A few months after Emperor Gokomatsu dead, Shōtetsu visited the mourning Royal Court to see the scenery of *Ryōan*, according to Kenkō’s report.

In Chapter 3 of his private collection of poems “*Sōkonsyū*”, his poems at then were recorded with long preface.

In early February, I visited the Royal Court accompanied by a member of the nobility to see the scenery of *Ryōan*. We were walking around the main hall, *Shishinden*. All of the Court scenery was shrouded in darkness. ... The entire Emperor’s dwelling, *Seiryōden*, was colored black, including the moving walls of high ranked nobility’s camp. The curtains were colored dark gray, the shelves were all locked and no one was in here. The sins of ceremony and moving wall on which were painted images of Court ceremonies was in its normal position.

His poem is this.

Ima zo Miru Ususumi Zome no Ashisudare
Kumo no Uenimo Kakarikeru Yō wo.

I see now the dark scenery of the Court in mourning! Curtains hanging here are all dark gray. In the Court like above the clouds, here all is in darkness.

“*Ima zo Miru* (I see now)” is the main word to express his feeling. He feels satisfaction upon seeing the unique scenery of the Court mourning. He also saw the Emperor who was 16 years old. Even though their eyes met, The Emperor did not recognize him. For him, the Emperor is just like a person in a painted picture. He is merely a visitor from the outside the Court.

However, Shōtetsu did not compose his world of *Waka*, without relations to life of the Court. The beauty of his poem is deeply based on that world. Seeking the beauty of the Court was his world of poem.

Shōtetsu named his beautiful world “*Yūgen*”. He repeats what is *Yūgen* in his essay, “*Shōtetsu-Monogatari*”. *Yūgen* is a kind of white one indeed like the moving clouds in the sky or the snow in the winds.

We can probably say; the *Yūgen* is a kind of white floating object. Or we can say it is like four or five Court ladies who are in full beautiful dress and looking fully-bloomed cherry blossoms in the main hall of the Court.

He talks of *Yūgen* as a pure white object and as full colored object. But he make no mention of the relationship between the two. It is likely that for Shōtetsu, pure white is just a cover for colorful things hiding behind. We think the structure of his beauty is that, surface is pure white but it is hold by colorful things; its beauty is structured so that the surface is pure white, but this pureness shelters colorful object. But the image of “ladies” bears more resemblance to painted women, not actually women, real images of women are considered spoiled.

IV

Shōtetsu talks about his own *waka* in “*Shōtetsu-Monogatari*”. He features those *waka* that succeeded in expressing his *Yūgen*. This is one of those *waka*.

Sakeba Chiru Yonoma no Hana no Yume no Uchi ni
Yagate Magirenu Mine no Shirakumo

The cherry blossoms will fall in a few days. I dreamed they are falling in the night. But I thought it was pure dreaming. The next morning I saw the mountain. I found the top of mountain being white. The white that I found was not flowers but clouds. O! It was not just a dream.

This *waka* is very difficult to understand. According to his essay, my interpretation is given above. Although the surface meaning is simple, the *waka* contains very complex images.

Additionally, he states that this poem is based on the *waka* of “*Genji-Monogatari*”. In the chapter titled *Wakamurasaki*, *Genji* sings after his love affair with Lady *Fujitsubo*.

Mitemo Mata Ōyomarenaru Yume no Uchi ni
Yagate Magiruru Wagami Tomogana

I can make love with you. But after now, can we meet like we did tonight? I want to go with you into the world of dreams. In dream, everything is dream.

Behind pure white scenery he hides very deeply complex images of a love affair. Lady *Fujitsubo* is *Genji's* stepmother. And, as such, this love affair has very complex dynamics in terms of personal relationships. But why did Shōtetsu choose the same

image for falling flowers and love affairs ?

He further gives another *Yūgen waka*.

Yūmagure Soreka to Mieshi Omokage no

Kasumu zo Katami Ariake no Tsuki

In the evening, in the twilight darkness, I saw a lady —perhaps she was my lover. I replay her image in my mind in all night. Her image becomes dim like the moon in the early morning.

He says this about the above *waka* in his essay.

I express in this *waka* scenery like thin clouds covering the morning moon or fog hiding cherry blossoms. The words and subject of this *waka* have images that are beyond description. They are *Yūgen* and elegant.

His emotion of love melts with the feeling from flowers and moon.

This *waka* is also based on “*Genji-Monogatari*”. In the chapter titled *Tenarai, Ukibune*, who is loved by both a nobleman and a royal prince, comes back to life after committing suicide throwing herself in the Uji river. Shōtetsu’s *waka* is based on the scene that she remembers her complex love affair. And both his *waka* is based on the scene in the chapter titled *Yūgao*, in which *Yūgao* mistakes *Genji* for her ex-lover and brings him a love poem. Shōtetsu’s *waka* is based on the beginning and ending of two painful love stories. But in his *waka*, such a real world becomes a world of ideal beauty. Such idealism is the beauty of his *waka*.

V

We say the Ancient Court culture is the “*Miyabi*”, the elegance. But its substance is very humanlike. The real lives of the Court reflected its culture. Sometimes this means the sighs of lovers, sometimes the voices of secretly political talks. These details make the Ancient Court culture more humanlike.

But the Ancient Court culture on which *waka* in the Middle Ages were based, is not the live culture, but the culture in the books and pictures and so on—a fixed culture, a culture which stops one’s moving. As the years go by, this image becomes disassociated from real Court life. It becomes idealized. It is by this process that poets like Shōtetsu, who are not noblemen or priests not born to nobility, gain recognition as main position of *waka* poets. Of course, they were separated from the real Court life of the Middle Ages.

The *Ōnin*-battle, which destroyed Kyoto at all, came only eight years after Shōtetsu’s death. His pupils were engaged in battle. Shinkei, who said “the ice is the most elegance”, was one of these pupils. Those ages came soon.

Notes

Kenkō 兼好 Shōtetsu 正徹

I

Waka 和歌 *Renga* 連歌 *Haikai* 俳諧

Manyōshū 万葉集

Sandaishū 三代集 (*Kokin-Wakashū* 古今和歌集 *Gosen-Wakashū* 後撰和歌集

Shui-Wakashū 拾遺和歌集 *Waka anthologies by the Royal Court in 10th*)

Minamoto Yoritomo 源頼朝

Kyoto 京都 Kamakura 鎌倉

II

Tsurezuregusa 徒然草 (Priest) Kenkō 兼好(法師)

Nijō Tameyo 二条為世

Ryōan 諒闇

Priest Henjō (僧正)遍昭

Emperor Fukakusa 深草天皇(仁明天皇) Emperor Gouda 後宇多天皇

III

Seikadō 静嘉堂

Emperor Gokomatsu 後小松天皇

Sōkonsyū 草根集

Yūgen 幽玄 *Shōtetsu-Monogatari* 正徹物語

IV

Genji-Monogatari 源氏物語 *Wakamurasaki* 若紫 *Fujitsubo* 藤壺

Tenarai 手習 *Ukibune* 浮舟 Uji river 宇治川

Yūgao 夕顔

V

Miyabi 雅 (みやび) *Ōnin-battle* 応仁の乱 Shinkei 心敬

Original texts by classical Japanese

(1) 『徒然草』第二十八段

諒闇の年ばかりあはれなることはあらず。倚廬の御所のさまなど、板敷を下げ、葦の御簾を掛けて、布の帽額あらあらしく、御調度どものおろそかに、みな人の装束、太刀、平緒まで、異様なるぞゆゆしき。

(2) 『古今和歌集』哀傷歌

深草帝御時に、蔵人頭にて、夜昼、なれつかうまつりけるを、諒闇になりければ、さらに世にも交じらずして、比叡山に登りて、頭おろしてけり。その又の年、皆人御服脱ぎて、或は冠り賜はりなど、喜びけるを聞きて、よめる 僧正遍昭
みな人は花の衣になりぬなり苔の袂よかわきだにせよ

(3) 『草根集』卷第三

二月上旬のころ、ある人にともなひて、内裏の諒闇のけしき見参らせたくて、南殿の方より見めぐりしに、いづくもおしこめられたり。一 中略 一清涼殿にめぐりて侍れば、殿上の障子よりはじめて墨染めにて、葦の御簾はしもひとつ色にて、母屋の廂もうちおろされて、人影も見えず。時の札、年中行事の衝立障子など、たちど変はらず侍りし
今ぞ見るうす墨染めの葦すだれ雲の上にもかかりける世を

(4) 『正徹物語』

ただ飄白としたる体を幽玄体と申すべきか。南殿の花の盛りに咲き乱れたるを、きぬばかま着たる女房四五人ながめたらん風情を幽玄体と云ふべきか。

(5) 『正徹物語』(歌のみ)

咲けば散る夜の間の花の夢のうちにやがてまぎれぬ峰の白雲

(6) 『源氏物語』若紫卷(歌のみ)

光源氏

見ても又逢ふ夜まれなる夢のうちにやがてまぎるる憂き身ともがな

藤壺

世がたりに人や伝へんたぐひなく憂き身をさめぬ夢になしても

(7) 『正徹物語』(歌のみ)

夕まぐれそれか見えし面影の霞むぞ形見ありあけの月