

## **Erotic Poetry of the Heian Court: Considering the Love Tanka of Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu**

**by Terry Ann Carter**

Japan's Heian Era (794 -1185) considered to be the Golden Age of Japanese literary history, produced two of Japan's major women poets who became legendary through their illumination of the human condition with poems of beauty, truthfulness, eroticism, and compression. Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu thrived in the aristocratic culture of the Heian court which proved to be a uniquely auspicious environment for women writers. The reason for this flowering, was the central role of the arts in the conduct of daily life; the place of poetry in Heian Japan was essential in all fundamental aspects of life.

One thousand years ago, Heian-kyo was one of the few centers of high civilization anywhere in the world. The importance of poetry was shared by all members of court society, not just a few "writers". Every personal and ceremonial experience, whether public or private, called for poems which might add resonance to the moment. "The first opening of spring blossoms, the death of a child, a glimpse of the moon, an official ritual, even the return of a forgotten fan was not complete without an accompanying poem. And for the purpose of softening the relations between men and women, poetry was ubiquitous."

Ono no Komachi (834 - ?) lived in the early days of this Golden Era and became the subject of legend almost from the time of her death. Little is known about her life. Historians believe Komachi to have been the daughter of the Lord of Dewa and to have served the court on the middle of the ninth century. Legends, folktales, and songs add that Komachi was not only an outstanding woman poet of her time, but also the most beautiful and desirable of women. Also, according to legend, the renowned poet ended her life in anonymity, isolation, and poverty - an ancient half-mad hag living outside the city walls, though still writing poetry and possessing a deep understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

In order to appreciate Komachi's poetry (the 31 syllables of tanka) it is necessary to understand the role of Eros in the lives of court women. The first intimation of a new romance for a woman of the court was the arrival of a messenger to her front door, bearing a five lined poem in an unfamiliar hand. If the woman found the poem sufficiently intriguing, if the paper it was written on was sufficiently suited for its content and mood, if the calligraphy was acceptably graceful - then, her encouraging reply - itself, in the form of a poem - would set in motion a clandestine, late night visit from her suitor. The first night together was, according to established etiquette, sleepless; lovemaking and talk were expected to continue (without pause) until the man, protesting the night's brevity, departed in the first light of pre-dawn. A morning after poem was then exchanged and the night's success was judged on whether the poems were equally ardent and accomplished.

The following tanka from Ono no Komachi highlight the impact of her emotions: sometimes derisive, sometimes scorching.

*Without changing colours  
in the emptiness  
of this world of ours*

*the heart of man  
fades like a flower*

*He does not come  
tonight in the dark moon  
I wake wanting him  
my breasts heave and blaze  
my heart chars*

*Awake tonight  
with loneliness  
I cannot keep myself  
from longing  
for the handsome moon*

More has been recorded about the life of Izumi Shikibu, who came to the Heian court at the height of its greatness to serve a former empress. Born around 974, she, too, was the daughter of a lord. Despite her marriage to a provincial official, Shikibu began a passionate liaison with the empress's step-son, which resulted in a scandal, divorce, and disownment by her family. A year after her lover died, his brother, Prince Atsumichi, sent Shikibu an exploratory gift of orange blossoms, and commenced a new affair. In her famous Diary, Shikibu recounts the beginning of their love through the time Atsumichi persuaded her to move into his compound despite protestations from his wife. Atsumichi's death, in an epidemic, ended the central relationship of her life.

Lady Shikibu was known not only for her poetry, but also for her beauty and her fiery temperament. Her use of nature in the 31 syllabled poems connects a harmonic resonance between the natural world and affairs of the heart. The "flowering plum" is more than a beautiful tree in bloom; it is the first blush of spring and new love.

Confined to the palace, Heian women used poetry to communicate with the outside world. Intrigues, courtship, separations were conducted through the exchange of letters and poems. Much of a woman's life was spent waiting for a reply, which often did not arrive. It is not surprising, then, that the Heian word for love (koi) means longing.

*Lying alone  
my black hair tangled  
uncombed  
I long for the one  
who touched it first*

*Why haven't I  
thought of it before?  
This body  
remembering yours  
is the keepsake you left*

*In this world  
love has no colour-  
yet how deeply*

*my body  
is stained by yours*

*No different, really-  
a summer moth's  
visible burning  
and this body  
transformed by love*

*Even if I now saw you  
only once  
I would long for you  
through worlds  
worlds*

Both Ono no Komachi and Izumi Shikibu stand out as two of the greatest poets in a Golden Age of literature, not simply because they achieved technical virtuosity in their chosen form of expression ( the 31 syllables of the five lined tanka) but because they used that form as a medium of reflection and introspection. And, as Jane Hirshfield points out, a thousand years later, we may turn to these poems and find an absolutely accurate and moving description of our most common and central experiences of love and loss. “We turn to these poems not to discover the past but to experience the present more deeply. In this way, they satisfy the test of all great literature, for it is our own lives we find illuminated in them.”

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