

Japanese Women Poets

An Anthology



Translated and with an Introduction by

Hiroaki Sato

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An East Gate Book



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK



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First published 2008 by M.E. Sharpe

Published 2015 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Japanese women poets : an anthology / translator and editor Hiroaki Sato.

p. cm.—(Japan in the modern world)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-0-7656-1783-5 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN: 978-0-7656-1784-2 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. Japanese poetry—Translations into English. 2. Japanese poetry—Women authors—Translations into English. I. Sato, Hiroaki, 1942—

PL872.E3J379 2007

895.6'1089287—dc22

2006019874

ISBN 13: 9780765617842 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 9780765617835 (hbk)

Japanese Women Poets

To Nancy

I sent a poem to a man I was in love with as fleetingly as dew:

White dew, dreams, this world, illusions: all these last for eternities in comparison.

—Izumi Shikibu

Note and Acknowledgments

All Japanese names in this anthology are given the Japanese way, family name first. Following Japanese custom, poets are sometimes identified by personal name or penname, sometimes by family name. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. Several *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* translations originally appeared in *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry* (Doubleday, 1981; Columbia University Press, 1986); a passage from *Mumyōshū* quoted in the introduction, a passage from the *Masu-Kagami* in the Kunai-kyō section, as well as all the poems of Princess Shikishi, in *String of Beads: Complete Poems of Princess Shikishi* (University of Hawaii Press, 1993); “Record of an Autumn Wind,” complete and fully annotated, in *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 55, no. 1 (Spring 2000); all the poems of Ema Saikō, in *Breeze Through Bamboo: Kanshi of Ema Saikō* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Yosano Akiko’s “Cochineal Purple” (from *Midaregami*), “May It Not Come to Pass that You Die,” “The Woman,” “In Praise of May,” and “Auguste’s Single Strike” in *The University of California Book of Romantic and Post-Romantic Poetry*; some of Nagase Kiyoko’s poems, in *Poetry Kanto 2006*; many of Fujiki Kiyoko’s haiku, in *ant ant ant ant ant* (Fall 2003); some of Ishigaki Rin’s poems, in *From the Country of Eight Islands* and *Poetry Kanto 2006*; Takarabe Toriko’s “Talk of Horses” in *Circumference* (Fall 2003), several in online magazine *Fascicle* (Summer 2005), and several in *Poetry Kanto 2006*; all of Shinkawa Kazue’s poems, in *Not a Metaphor: Poems of Shinkawa Kazue* (P.S., A Press, 1999); many of Tada Chimako’s poems, in *Anthology of World Poetry of the 20th Century*, Volume II (Green Integer); all of Tomioka Taeko’s poems, in *See You Soon: Poems of Taeko Tomioka* (Chicago Review Press, 1979); some of Koyanagi Reiko’s poems, in *Rabbit of the Nether World* (Red Moon Press, 1999); all of Kimura Nobuko’s poems, in *The Village Beyond: Poems of Nobuko Kimura* (P.S., A Press, 2002); one of her poems, “Over There,” also in the Asia special issue of *Atlanta Review* (Spring/Summer 2002); all of Nagashima Minako’s poems, in *The Girl Who Turned into Tea: Poems of Minako Nagashima* (P.S., A Press, 2000); fifteen of Kamakura Sayumi’s haiku in *Modern Haiku* (Fall 2000); Abe Hinako’s “Garden Party” and “The Future Belongs to Olenka” in online magazine *Fascicle* (Summer 2005) and Nagami Atsuko’s poem, “Descending to ‘Hell Valley’ in the Nippara Stalactite Cave,” in the *Tin House* magazine (Summer 2003, Vol. 4, No. 4) and some others, in *Bomb* (Spring 2004); all of Park Kyong-Mi in online magazine *The Green Integer Review*, No. 2 (March–April 2006); Hirata Toshiko’s “Recent Photos” and “A Woman’s Life or Nakayama Atsuko” and Koike Masayo’s “The Most Sensuous Room” in online magazine *How2* (2005); most of “A Brief Survey of Haiku by Women,” in *Modern Haiku* (Autumn 2002) and most of “A Brief

Survey of Senryū by Women,” in *Modern Haiku* (Winter–Spring 2003); “Twelve Months” in *Modern Haiku* (Winter–Spring 2006); and some of the other modern haiku, in *Blythe Spirit* and *Frogpond*.

My relatives and friends helped collect books for this anthology: Hirata Takako, Kamei Haruko, and Yano Sumiko among my relatives; Abe Hinako, Ishii Tatsuhiko, Kakizaki Shōko, Takagaki Chihiro, Ueda Akira, and Yajima Mieko among my friends. Many poets gave me their books. Abe Hinako, Bessho Makiko, Ishii Tatsuhiko, Koike Masayo, Takagaki Chihiro, and Yajima Mieko obtained bibliographic and other information for me. Taira Sōsei helped me with women’s senryū. Louise E. Virgin helped prepare some of the illustrations.

Doris Bargaen, Kathleen Dooley, Jim Kacian, Leza Lowitz, Douglas Messerli, Grace Ogawa-Preuss, Linda Peevey, and Ursula Smith read and commented on some of the translations. Kate Wildman Nakai, editor, and Lynne E. Riggs, managing editor, of *Monumenta Nipponica*, edited “Record of an Autumn Wind” with professional dedication. My erudite friend Kyoko Iriye Selden helped me in countless ways. Among other things, she transcribed on the computer for me the handwritten manuscript *Kurehatori*, a collection of tanka by Sakuma (née Hiroe) Tachieko. The painter Makie Hino drew the portrait of Yatabe Ryōkichi (p. xxxi) from an old photograph.

My primary readers were, as always, Robert Fagan, Lenore Parker, and Nancy Rossiter.

This book would not have been possible without the patience and generosity of everyone.

Hiroaki Sato

Chronology

Nara Period (710–784)

712: *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*)

720: *Nihon Shoki* (*History of Japan*)

751: *Kaifūsō* (*Fond Recollections of Poetry*), anthology of kanshi

Late in the century: *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*)
Beowulf

Heian Period (794–1185)

814–827: three imperial anthologies of kanshi

905: *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*), first imperial anthology of Japanese poems

Early 11th century: *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*)

Kamakura Period (1192–1333)

1205: *Shin-Kokinshū* (*New Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*), eighth imperial anthology of Japanese poems

late 13th century: *Yoru no Tsuru* (*The Night Crane*), Abutsu's treatise on poetics

Muromachi Period (1331–1573)

1357: *Tsukubashū* (*Tsukuba Collection*), semi-imperial renga anthology
Christine de Pizan (1364–1430)

1439: *Shin-Zoku-Kokinshū* (*New Sequel to the Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems*), 21st and last imperial anthology of Japanese poems

From the latter half of the 15th century to the late 16th century: Japan's Age of Warring States

Isabella d'Este (1474–1539)

Louise Labé (1520?–66)

1557: *Tottel's Miscellany*

Edo Period (1600–1868)

Ann Bradstreet (1612?–72)

Aphra Behn (1640–89)

Juana Ines de la Cruz (1648–95)

1684: *Kokin Haikai Onna Kasen* (*Thirty-Six Ancient and Modern Women Haikai Poets*), collection of 36 women haikai poets compiled by Ihara Saikaku; first such anthology

1702: *Mikawa Komachi* (*Mikawa Beauties*), second half devoted to women haikai poets, compiled by Ōta Hakusetsu

1747: *Tamamoshū* (*Coralline Collection*), collection of women haikai poets compiled by Yosa Buson

1789: *Umiyama* (*Sea and Mountain*), anthology with a substantial collection of haibun by a woman

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61)

Emily Dickinson (1830–86)

Christina Rossetti (1830–94)

Modern Period (since 1868)

1868: Tokugawa shogunate replaced by monarchism

Amy Lowell (1874–1925)

Edith Sitwell (1887–1964)

1882: *Shintai-shi Shō* (*New-Style Poetry*), first attempt to introduce Western-style verse

1901: *Midaregami* (*Hair in Disorder*), collection of tanka by Yosano Akiko

1904–05: Russo-Japanese War

1911: Hiratsuka Raichō starts a women's magazine, *Seitō* (*Bluestockings*)

1941: Japan assaults Pearl Harbor

1945: Japan surrenders

Twelve Months

Until it adopted the solar calendar in the early 1870s, Japan used the lunar calendar. In the lunar calendar, a month consists of twenty-nine or thirty days. To make up for the obvious shortfall, seven intercalary months are inserted every nineteen years. Lunar months are about forty days behind those of the solar calendar, though an intercalary month sometimes throws this off. Unlike the solar calendar, in which spring begins in March, in the lunar calendar spring begins in First Month.

The basic Japanese names for the twelve months, lunar and solar, are numerical: *ichi-gatsu*, “First Month,” for January, *ni-gatsu*, “Second Month,” for February, and so on. But each lunar month also has a variety of names, some originating in China, some in Japan. A list of the most common alternative names for the twelve lunar months, along with their etymological explanations or conjectures, is given below, each illustrated with a haiku by a woman. Much of the information comes from Muzuhara Shūōshi, Katō Shūson, and Yamakoto Kenkichi, eds., *Nihon Dai-Saijiki* (Kōdansha, 1983), a massive compendium of fifteen thousand *kigo*, “seasonal words,” each seasonal indicator accompanied by haiku—sometimes dozens of them. I have also consulted the four-volume *Haikai Saijiki* (Shinchōsha, 1950–1968) and the five-volume *Haiku Saijiki* (Kadokawa Shoten, 1955–1980).

Intimate Month (*Mutsuki*) for First Month. The name is said to reflect the tendency of people to get together and become *mutsumaji*, “intimate,” during the New Year festivities. Kusamura Motoko (1919–1974) wrote, referring to the pine decorations for the New Year known as *kadomatsu*, “gate pines”:

Matsu torete nochi no Mutsuki no kakeashi ni
After the pines taken off Intimate Month trots away

Clothes Doubled (*Kisaragi*) for Second Month. With the word consisting of *ki* (clothes) and *saragi* (wearing more), it tells you that the lingering cold can sometimes force you to wear more clothes. Hosomi Ayako (1907–1987) wrote:

Kisaragi ga mayu no atari ni kuru gotoshi
As though Clothes Doubled came near my eyebrows

More Growth (*Yayoi*) for Third Month. The name is thought to derive from *iyaoi*, “irrepressible growth,” in reference to the time of year when the growth of plants becomes ever more pronounced. Ichiriki Tamiko (dates uncertain) wrote:

Hoshimono o sukoshi yoru hosu Yayoi-zuki

I put up some clothes to dry at night under the More Growth moon

Deutzia Month (*Uzuki*) for Fourth Month. The shrub with white flowers called *unohana* or *utsugi* (*Deutzia crenata* or *scabra*) flourishes during this month. Some regret the infelicitous sound of the English and Latin names of the plant and substitute *deutzia* with “mock orange” or “saxifrage”; both English and Latin names come from Jean Deutz, mayor of Amsterdam and patron of botany. *Unohana* is prized for the bright white clusters its flowers make, which in classical poetry are often compared to snow or crystal. Chiyo-jo (1703?–1775) captures that aspect of this flowering shrub in her *hokku*:

Unohana wa hi o mochinagara kumorikeri

Deutzia flowers hold forth their light on a cloudy day

Seedling Month (*Satsuki*) for Fifth Month. Some say *satsuki* is an abbreviation of *sanaetsuki*, “rice-seedling month,” and some that it is that of *samidare-tsuki*, “rainy-season month,” although, for that matter, *sa* in *samidare* itself is said to mean Fifth Month, *midare* meaning “water-dripping.” Yamazaki Tomiko (dates uncertain) uses one of the non-abbreviated names of *satsuki* in the following *haiku* in which *ni*, “load,” suggests a basket filled with rice seedlings:

Shimabito no mina ni o ou ya Sanaetsuki

The island people all carry a load: Rice-seedling Month

Waterless Month (*Minazuki*) for Sixth Month. Japan’s rainy season (*tsuyu*), which lasts for about thirty days, is followed by hot, sun-drenched days during this month, hence the name. In the following *haiku* of Hasegawa Kanajo (1887–1969), the water in the rice paddies still hasn’t evaporated:

Minazuki no tagoto ni sagi o tenjikeri

In Waterless Month each paddy’s dotted with herons

Letter Month (*Fumizuki*) for Seventh Month. *Fumi* means “letter,” “writing,” “book,” etc. The seventh day of Seventh Month is Tanabata, Japan’s star festival when the once-a-year meeting is allowed to take place between Princess Weaver (Vega) and the Oxherd (Altair) across the River of Heaven (the Milky Way). As U. A. Casal describes it in *The Five Sacred Festivals in Ancient Japan* (Sophia University, 1967), on this day freshly cut bamboo is “adorned with numerous pieces of gaily colored paper: neat strips which twirl on a thread, and which, closer inspection will show, are covered with inscriptions, poems in fact.” The name of the month comes, some say, from the act of opening anthologies for children to copy appropriate poems on those gaily colored strips of paper. In

Hasegawa Kanajo's piece on the month, sasafuri, "bamboo leaves falling," is a summer kigo, which may onomatopoeically suggest rain, and the word *hana*, "flowers," points to the colorful strips of paper. Rain on Tanabata prevents the two lovers from having their annual tryst. Some haiku practitioners argue you can't use two kigo in a single piece.

Sasafuri ya Fumizuki no hana ochi nagashi

Bamboo leaves falling Letter Month flowers drop and flow

Leaf Month (*Hazuki*) for Eighth Month. The tanka poet Fujiwara no Kiyosuke (1104–1177) says in his treatise on poetics, *Ōgishō*, that the name derives from the fact that during the month tree leaves turn color and fall. The renga master Matsumura Jōha (1524–1602) argues in *Shihōshō*, a treatise on poetics he prepared for the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, that the Chinese characters to be used for *hazuki* should be those that mean "first" and "month" because it is in this month that geese, coming from the north, first appear in Japan. In the following haiku by Kashiwamura Sadako (born 1916), Otoko-yama most likely refers to a hill south of Kyoto which has atop it the famous shrine for the deity of war, Iwashimizu Hachiman-gū:

Otoko-yama kudarite Hazuki no te o nurasu

Coming down Mount Male I wet my Leaf Month hands

Long Month (*Nagatsuki*) for Ninth Month. Nights become longer during the month, hence the name, some say. Shibata Hakuyōjo (1906–1984) has:

Nagatsuki no ichiju katamuku hoshi-akari

In Long Month a single tree tilts in the star light

Godless Month (*Kannazuki*) for Tenth Month. Yoshida Kenkō (1283–1351?) devotes Section 202 of his *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*) to a discussion of the striking name: "There is nothing that says that, Tenth Month being called Godless Month, we should avoid deity-related services [during this month]. There is no authoritative source on this, either. However, the name may derive from the fact that there is no shrine festival this month. There is a theory that in this month all the thousands of deities gather at the Grand Shrine [of Ise, where the presiding deity is Sun Goddess Amaterasu-ō-mi-kami], but there is no authority on this. In the event, Ise should make it a particularly festive month, but it does no such thing. In Tenth Month, there are a number of imperial visits to various shrines, but many are inauspicious." In other words, according to Kenkō, why this month is called "godless" is not known. In more recent accounts, all the deities are said to gather at the Grand Shrine of Izumo, where the chief deity Ōkuninushi-no-mikoto is male, perhaps for a fall banquet, and because they vacate their own

shrines to congregate in one, the month, it is explained, is “godless.” Katsura Nobuko (1914–2004) has written a mystifying piece:

Hashigo yori hito no nioi ya Kannazuki

From a ladder comes someone’s smell this Godless Month

Frost Month (*Shimotsuki*) for Eleventh Month. The name is understood to reflect the meteorological phenomenon of the month. Watanabe Kazuko (dates uncertain) wrote:

Shimotsuki ya chashibu shimitaru fukin hosu

Frost Month: I dry a napkin soaked with tea puckeriness

Priests’ Run (*Shiwasu*) for Twelfth Month. So called because during the last month of the year even monks and priests, who are supposed to maintain transcendental calm, are forced to run about to take care of unfinished business and chores. Conversely, some say the name derives from *shihatsu*, “month in which to finish doing things.” Matate Masayo (dates uncertain) has:

Machi Shiwasu ten ni mukaite ashiba kumu

Town in Priests’ Run: toward heaven scaffolds build

Introduction

Something held women back when it came to the writing of poetry, and since whatever it was that held them back failed to hold women back from writing novels, we must suppose that the inhibition had something, at least, to do with the antiquity and prestige of the art.

—James Fenton¹

Japanese poetry, which dates from the seventh century or earlier, has two distinct features: the sizable presence of women poets from the outset and a verse structure based on simple syllabic patterns.

Japan's oldest extant book, the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*), compiled in 712, and the more elaborate retelling of the same mythological and semi-mythological imperial lineage, the *Nihon Shoki* (*History of Japan*), compiled in 720, together contain a total of 190 distinct songs, and 58 of them, or 30 percent, are attributed to women. The figure falls to 12 percent for the *Man'yōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*), the great anthology of about 4,550 poems that took shape in the late eighth century. In "the twenty-one imperial anthologies," compiled from the early tenth century to 1439,² the number of women included sometimes becomes very small, but they are always present. In the case of the fourth imperial anthology, the *Go-Shūishū* (*Collection of Later Gleanings*), compiled in 1087, 104 of the total of 329 poets are women, as are the three best represented: Izumi Shikibu (born late 970s), Sagami (991?–1061?), and Akazome Emon (957?–1041?).³ This came about, explained the poet and ethnological student of Japanese literature Orikuchi Shinobu (Shaku Chōkū; 1887–1953),

1. James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 103.

2. The idea of compiling verse anthologies by the order of the emperor apparently came from China, but China never pursued the matter in earnest. Japan, in any case, is almost certainly the only country in the world that produced so many anthologies at the behest of the head of state. See Maruya Saiichi's short history of Japanese literature, *Nihon Bungaku Hayawakari* (Kōdansha, 1984), 7–8.

3. The "real" names of women poets in early periods are often unknown. The names we know are usually "court (nick)names," and the naming can be capricious. Izumi Shikibu was so called because her husband, Tachibana no Michisada, once served as governor of Izumi Province, and her father, Ōe no Masamune, was an officer in the Shikibu-shō, Ministry of Ceremonial. Sagami, who had nothing that might correspond to the second part of a "full name," was so called because her husband, Ōe no Kimiyori, once served as governor of Sagami Province. Akazome Emon was so called because her father, Akazome Tokimochi, was an *emon*, a palace guard. She was also called Masahira Emon because her husband was Ōe no Masahira.

because of Japan's "historical habit of recognizing women's poetry as the same as men's in rank."⁴

In contrast, women's presence in Western poetry until recent centuries is so meager as to tempt James Fenton to make the kind of assertion cited at the outset of this introduction. Or, as Burton Watson once put it, explaining how the situation is different in Japan, "Try writing 'Sappho' on a sheet of paper and listing under it all the other famous women poets in Western literature down to the middle of the [nineteenth] century and you will see what I mean."⁵ In England, for example, *Tottel's Miscellany*, the first anthology of English verse, published in 1557, does not seem to include a single woman, even among the "uncertain authors."

In certain of the later periods—in particular, from the late fourteenth century to the early seventeenth century, when the court was overshadowed by the military government and the whole country was in a state of constant warfare—women poets may not have done as well as their forebears, but they were never completely eclipsed. When it comes to the past one hundred years or so, several books of poems by women have created national sensations. Among them are *Midaregami* (*Hair in Disorder*), in 1901, by Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), who sang in romantic delirium of a young woman's desires and fantasies; *Chibusa Sōshitsu* (*My Breasts Lost*), in 1954, by Nakajō Fumiko (1922–1954), who chronicled the effects of a breast cancer that eventually killed her; *Sarada Kinenbi* (*Salad Anniversary*), in 1987, by Tawara Machi (born 1962), who described youthful love affairs with the sort of lightheartedness that was thought to characterize a generation known by the sobriquet *shin-jinrui*, "new mankind"; and *B-men no Natsu* (*Summer on Side B*), in 1994, by Mayuzumi Madoka (born 1962), who depicted an illicit love affair in a book-length sequence of haiku. One might add *Yorikakarazu* (*Relying on Nothing*), a 1999 book by Ibaraki Noriko (born 1926), which, because a popular column of a major daily mentioned it, sold 300,000 copies.

Anthologies are always arbitrary in their selections to a greater or lesser extent, but two recent ones seem to set new standards for tanka poets in modern times. In Takano Kimihiko's *Gendai no Tanka* (Kōdansha, 1991), 38 out of the 105 poets selected for the period since the late nineteenth century are women. In Okai Takashi's *Gendai Hyakunin Isshu* (Asahi Shimbunsha, 1996), 34 of the 100 poets selected for the period since the end of the Second World War are women.

The title of Okai's book, incidentally, comes from the most famous mini-anthology ever compiled in Japan: the *Hyakunin Isshu* (*One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets*). In that canonical selection, prepared in the thirteenth century by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241), 21 of the 100 poets are women.

4. Orikuchi Shinobu, *Josei Tanka-shi* (*History of Tanka by Women*), vol. 11, *Zenshū*, 4th rev. ed. (Chūō Kōron Sha, 1984), 48.

5. Burton Watson, Introduction, in *See You Soon: Poems of Taeko Tomioka*, trans. Hiroaki Sato (Chicago Review Press, 1979), 11.

Women Assessing Their Own Position

This is not to say that Japanese women poets have been mostly content with their lot. *Mumyō Sōshi* (*Nameless Book*), a remarkable work of literary criticism that is attributed to the poet known as Lord Shunzei's Daughter (1171?–1252?)—actually a grandchild of Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204), who adopted her—creates a setting in which an old nun listens to a group of young women discuss women's literary achievements: There is *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), one of the women says, “a rarity that couldn't have been born of the forces of this world alone.” There is, says another, *Sagoromo Monogatari* (*The Tale of Sagoromo*), “second only to *Genji* in popularity.” And there is *Yoru no Nezame* (*Awaking at Night*), whose focus on one woman's suffering “touches you deeply.” (*Sagoromo Monogatari* is attributed to Minamoto no Yorikuni's Daughter, also known as Rokujō Saiin Senji [died 1092]. The author of *Yoru no Nezame* is unknown but is assumed to be female.)

Among the writers and poets, the women go on to say, Ono no Komachi, judging from her poetry, “must have been exquisite in every way—in her appearance, her conduct, her heart.” Sei Shōnagon may not be “as good a poet as you might expect” but has “fully expressed her heart in *Makura no Sōshi* [*The Pillow Book*], detailing all the wonderful, pitiful, exquisite, and felicitous things in it.” There are, in addition, Koshikibu no Naishi and her mother, Izumi Shikibu, as well as their employer, Empress Teishi, not to mention Murasaki Shikibu and her employer, Empress Shōshi, also known by her Buddhist name, Jōtōmon'in.⁶

As it happens, this discussion is touched off when one of the group laments the “mortifying” (*kuchioshi*) state in which women find themselves. Anthologists—such as Shunzei, who, at Retired Emperor Goshirakawa's command, edited a few years earlier the seventh imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Senzaishū*—often end up including mediocre pieces of those of higher status as a mark of deference, the young woman notes. “That must be humiliating, don't you think?” she asks. “Yes, it must be,” she responds to her own question before continuing: “But nothing is more mortifying than being a woman. Since long ago many of us have fine-tuned our sensibilities and studied the Way of Poetry but not one has been asked to edit an imperial anthology. Isn't that mortifying?”

The young woman ends her complaint saying that aspiring poets must try to “imitate” superior poets of the past and the present, “even those who are only slightly better” than they, imitation being *de rigueur* in writing poetry. To this, another person, perhaps the old nun or Lord Shunzei's Daughter herself, says: “You know

6. *Mumyō Sōshi* is thought to have been written around 1200. A century earlier, the scholar of Chinese classics Ōe no Masafusa (1041–1111) assessed the situation differently. He cited Izumi Shikibu and Akazome Emon as representative poets but mentioned neither Murasaki Shikibu nor Sei Shōnagon, apparently because he did not regard the ability to write prose in the indigenous Japanese language as worth noting.