

# The Persistence of the Personal in Late Medieval *Uta*

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In a high tenor voice, and with wide, excited gestures, he pointed out to  
Psmith oaks with a history and rhododendrons with a past . . .

P.G. Wodehouse, *Leave it to Psmith*

**B**Y the fifteenth century the ancient Japanese *uta* 歌 form was by all accounts a highly codified genre, bound by elaborate rules governing everything from diction to prosody. Furthermore, poetic practice, by which I mean the act of poetic composition and all that encompassed it as an artistic field, was almost equally conventionalized. For historical records make it clear that in the late medieval period almost all *uta* were composed in a social, indeed, almost a ritual setting, and generally according to standards of decorum, performance, and etiquette as strict as those applying to diction. For

*Abbreviations:*

- NKBT*: Takagi Ichinosuke 高木市之助 et al., eds., *Nihon koten bungaku taikai*, 102 vols. (Iwanami shoten, 1958–68)
- NKT*: Sasaki Nobutsuna 佐々木信綱 and Kyūsojin Hitaku 久曾神昇, eds., *Nihon kagaku taikai*, 4th ed., 10 vols, 5 supplementary vols. (Kazama shobō, 1977)
- SKKS*: *Shin kokinshū*
- SKT*: Shinpen Kokka Taikan Henshū Inkai, eds., *Shinpen kokka taikan*, 10 double vols. (Kadokawa shoten, 1983–92)
- SNKBT*: Kubota Jun 久保田淳 et al., eds., *Shin nihon koten bungaku taikai*, 100 vols. (Iwanami shoten, 1989–)
- ST*: Wakashi Kenkyūkai, eds., *Shikashū taisei*, 8 vols. (Meiji shoin, 1973–76)

the student who wants to study “poetic culture” as well as poetic texts, however, there is generally little sign of this latter fact in the poems as recorded in various anthologies, where the social occasion is rarely noted. There is, nevertheless, one bit of “residue” of the setting of their production that is usually retained even when the poems have been radically recontextualized—namely their *dai* 題, or conventional topics.

The origins of *dai* can be traced back to a much earlier period in history, namely the early Heian period, when poems were first composed for *uta-awase* 歌合 (poem contests) or other gatherings in which a group of poets produced poems in a social setting. It was with the advent of another sub-genre, the *hyakushu uta* 百首歌, or “hundred-poem sequence,” later in that same period that composition on predetermined topics (a practice formally known as *daiei* 題詠) came into its own. Thereafter, the centrality of *daiei* to poetic culture cannot be denied. Quite literally, *dai* became mediating factors in nearly all areas of poetic work and provided the conceptual framework within which much discourse on poetry was undertaken. When poets met, they composed poems on topics, whether handed out beforehand (*kenjitsu* 兼日) or on the spot (*tōza* 当座); when they put together anthologies, even personal anthologies, they generally organized poems according to the topics on which they were composed; when they wrote handbooks or treatises, *daiei* was one of the primary topics to which they turned their attention, although generally not in philosophical but in technical terms (dealing with questions such as how the words of a topic should be distributed in the lines of a poem, what images were appropriate to certain topics, what constituted the offense of *bōdai* 傍題, or “skirting the topic,” etc.). This was true for the poets of the Shinkokin era and for all later generations of poets in the *uta* form, from Fujiwara no Tameie (1198–1275) to Tonna (1289–1372), Shōtetsu (1381–1459), and Sanjōnishi Sanetaka (1455–1537). As time went by, the number of different topics increased, but the basic conceptual categories—the four seasons, love, and miscellaneous topics such as travel and lamentation, articulated through natural imagery deemed acceptable by the tradition (spring cherry blossoms, summer fireflies, autumn leaves, winter frost, and so on)—remained remarkably the same.

By the fifteenth century, in fact, so central had the role of topics become that the association between poetry and topics became nearly automatic. At least, this was evidently the case for one Nakahara no Yasutomi 中原康富 (1400–1457), a middle-class court noble whose diary (*Yasutomi no ki* 康富の記) for the second day of the Ninth Lunar Month of Ōei 24 (1417) contains this passage:

Bored and with nothing better to do in the rain, I composed a poem:

“Love, Related to ‘the Moon’ ”

When to no avail  
I await  
          one who won’t come  
in the gloom of dusk,  
only my tears  
                  are companions  
as I gaze up  
          at the moon.<sup>1</sup>

*hakanaku mo / konu hito mataru / yūgure wa / namida o tomo no / tsuki o koso mire*

Exactly how far the mediating influence of the *dai* extends (one might ask, for instance, whether the moon was actually visible at the time, or whether the tears are a metaphorical reference to the rain) in this instance is impossible to ascertain. The very intervention of a topic in so private and informal a setting, however, shows how overpowering the intervention of *dai* had become in late medieval poetic culture.

*Dai* of course performed a number of obvious functions in the arena of poetic practice, some of them best understood in the context of imperial and other anthologies designed to represent a whole court era rather than the independent works of individuals. But one of the most obvious functions of conventional topics was to provide a bond between those composing poems for poetic gatherings, allowing them common ground on which to display their competence—which

<sup>1</sup> Zōho shiryō taisei kankōkai, comps., *Zōho shiryō taisei*, vol. 37 (Rinsen shoten, 1965), p. 15.

was a crucial need for all “masters” of the courtly arts and for all of those who hoped to gain and maintain reputations in elite culture. Ironically, however, this meant that their individual poems, which were at some level, at least, extensions of their personal practice, were at the point of presentation always already recontextualized as part of a communal effort that seemed to deny the relevance of more individualized, personal statement.

So *dai*, along with other conventions, seem to have made it possible to stand out from the crowd only in terms of a higher level of competence. In general, modern scholars, along with poets such as Ishikawa Takuboku (1886–1912) and Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), have in fact dismissed the poetry of the late classical period (from 1300–1500, roughly speaking) from serious consideration in the belief that *dai*, and other factors, made poems of that period deadeningly conventional, somehow completely detached from immediate personal experience, abstract, and cerebral—in a word, mere intellectual exercises rather than works of art.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there are hints in poetic memoirs and sometimes even in personal anthologies (*shikashū* 私家集) that encourage us to dispute such a generalization. In this paper it will be my task to present a few of those hints in an attempt to argue that neither producers nor consumers (who were not easily distinguishable from each other at the time) of *uta* in the late medieval age were so dominated by the tyranny of topics as the standard scholarly narrative almost unflinchingly suggests, or, more abstractly, to argue that poets did not always maintain so close a distinction between the generic and the personal.<sup>3</sup>

One sees bits and pieces of evidence scattered everywhere in the medieval record for the two general tendencies I will assert here, which are, first, the tendency for consumers to interpret poems writ-

<sup>2</sup> Sasaki Yukitsuna, “Daiei to wa nani ka,” in Waka bungakkai, eds., *Ronshū, dai no waka kūkan* (Kasama shoin, 1992), pp. 1–15.

<sup>3</sup> There are of course other responses to the standard historical narrative that could be raised here: such as the notion, well represented in many medieval treatises (I am thinking particularly of *Tamekane-kyō wakashō*, and of Shōtetsu’s praise for Teika’s prowess in this regard in *Shōtetsu monogatari*), that the real task of the poet in confronting a topic is to somehow make it one’s own through an act of emotional identification, immersion, or fusion. For a statement of this argument, see Edwin Cranston, “Waka Wars: Quarrels in an Inner Space,” *HJAS* 55.2 (1995), pp. 512–518.

ten on *dai* as personal statements and, second, the not necessarily concomitant tendency among producers to put a distinctly personal spin on *dai*. As outstanding instances of the former tendency one can of course adduce works such as *Saigyō monogatari* and scores of anecdotes about Saigyō (1118–1190) contained in scores of different texts, and also to Nō plays such as *Teika* by Konparu Zenchiku (d. 1468), in which *daiei* written by Teika and Princess Shikishi (d. 1201) are given real-life contexts. Perhaps one anecdote involving a famous poem by Retired Emperor Go-Toba (1180–1239) will stand for others too numerous to mention. The quotation is from a late medieval commentary of unknown authorship on a one-hundred poem sequence written by the Retired Emperor not long after he was exiled to the island of Oki as punishment for his attempt to overthrow the Kamakura military government in the Jōkyū Disturbance of 1221:

*I am*  
     serving now  
 as new keeper  
             of this isle!  
 —so blow  
             with care,  
 you rough winds  
             tossing the waves  
 in the seas  
             off Oki's shore.

*ware koso wa / nijimamori yo / oki no umi no / araki nami kaze / kokoro shite fuke*

The phrase “*I am serving now*” is crucial here. Lord Ietaka had come to visit the Retired Emperor on Oki, and after ten days was preparing to return home but was prevented by strong winds on the sea. “*I am serving now as new keeper of this isle,*” said His Majesty: “*You ocean waves—can you not show compassion for Ietaka, who is blameless, and allow him to return to the capital?*” No sooner had he said this, it is reported, than the winds abated and Lord Ietaka left for home.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Maruya Saiichi 丸谷才一, *Go-Toba-In* (Chikuma shobō, 1983), p. 12.

Here one might argue that even in its original context as part of a sequence in which the exiled Retired Emperor openly laments his separation from the capital, Go-Toba's poem was already abundantly personal. But the late medieval commentary clearly makes it more so, surrounding the composition with a narrative—itsself almost certainly apocryphal, according to modern scholars<sup>5</sup>—that casts it as the product of a particular context rather than of a mediating *dai*.<sup>6</sup> Late medieval readers would have known, of course, that Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158–1237) was one of the Retired Emperor's most dedicated courtiers and found it easy to read Go-Toba's command as an act of semi-divine intervention for a trusted friend, i.e., an affective statement arising from direct personal experience.

It is important, however, to note that this kind of interpretive embellishment is observable not only in legends about the lives of famous poets of the past, but also in brief anecdotes written by late medieval poets about their own contemporaries. The desire for a highly personalized context for poems extended beyond the boundaries of the classical canon. Thus we come across a brief note by the poet Kenzai 兼載 (1452–1510) in which he makes a poem by his cohort Shōkō 正広 (1412–94) into not just an example of the latter's skill in handling a conventional topic—by which I mean his ability to *imagine* himself in a particular situation—but instead a personal statement that quite literally seems to prophecy his own impending death.

When Shōkō turned eighty-two, he wrote this poem on the topic “Spring Blossoms”:

One here  
                   and one there—  
 so few  
                   the flowers in bloom  
 on the old cherry tree.  
 This year  
                   especially  
 I will resent  
                   the wind.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> In the original hundred-poem sequence, the poem appears under the general topic of *zō* 雑, or “miscellaneous.”

*hitotsu futatsu / oiki no sakura / sakinikeri / kotoshi bakari ya / kaze o ura-  
mimu*

He passed away during the summer of that year.<sup>7</sup>

Lest the point be missed here, one must point out that in his own personal anthology (where the poem appears as #1283 or #1284, depending on which of two major extant versions one chooses) Shōkō makes no such claim of prescience. There the headnote gives only the *dai* of the poem—“Regretting Falling Blossoms”—and a short headnote that says the poem was “written for a poem contest commissioned by Fujiwara Iesada on the eleventh day of the Third month of Chōkyō 2 [1488].”<sup>8</sup> That the poem was in fact written fully six years before Shōkō’s death in 1494 makes it possible to argue that what is at work in Kenzai’s statement is a desire to see the poem less as merely a competent handling of its topic than as a personal statement related directly to Shōkō’s thoughts about his own waning life. Whether Kenzai deliberately falsified the date of the poem’s composition in order to create an appropriate context for his reading or simply misremembered the facts is of course beyond our ability to know; but either way the incident problematizes the usual understanding of how *dai* were employed in poetic practice.

Rather than go on with such examples culled from other sources, however, I will now narrow my focus to the works of Shōkō’s teacher, Shōtetsu, partly because he wrote more about *dai* than almost anyone in the late medieval period. For of the 210 sections (107 in the first of two books, 103 in the second) in his *Shōtetsu monogatari*, at least 71 deal with topics in one way or another. Many sections are simply examples of his poems on given topics, with brief exegetical comments; but others, such as these, are prescriptive and seem in all sorts of ways to support the claims of the “master narrative” I alluded to above.

Section I, 53: A poem on the topic “Plants in the Cold” should not be about reeds because “Reeds in the Cold” and “Plants in the Cold” follow each other in the regular succession of topics.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The incident is noted in *Kenzai zōdan. NKT*, vol. 5 (Kazama shobō, 1977), p. 406.

<sup>8</sup> *Shōkashū*. Text available in *SKT*, vol. 8 (Kadokawa shoten, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Robert H. Brower, trans., *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, With an Introduction and Notes by

Section I, 56: For the topic “Garden,” the poem may include the eaves of the house, and for the topic “Eaves,” the poem is usually about eaves.<sup>10</sup>

Section II, 51: For a poem on “Praying for Love,” any of the gods may be used . . .<sup>11</sup>

Section II, 54: For the topic “A Fire in the Brazier,” one may treat either buried embers or a burning fire, but for the topic “Buried Embers,” one may not treat a fire in the brazier.<sup>12</sup>

Section II, 69: The topic “Love: In Hiding” means that the other person is hiding from the speaker. Her whereabouts is being concealed from him.<sup>13</sup>

Section II, 70: When composing only a few verses, such as a set of twenty or thirty, it is good to select compound topics that will give you something to think about.<sup>14</sup>

These comments show that even the supposedly “liberal” Shōtetsu could be as pedantic as his conservative opponents when it came to professional matters. At times, however, Shōtetsu reveals that for him topics are a means to an end and not the end itself, as when he says,

I, 33: A person who has reached a high level of skill and attainment need not, when composing poems freely, have in mind any specific topics. Since each poem will of itself turn out to contain the essence of a particular topic, it makes no difference whether or not the actual words of the topic are in it.<sup>15</sup>

Shōtetsu also includes an anecdote that provides clear evidence that—no matter what the context of their initial production—the urge

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Steven D. Carter (Ann Arbor: The Center for Japanese Studies, the University of Michigan, 1992), p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

to read poems as the statements of immediate personal significance rather than as imaginative exercises was there even among those accustomed to writing poems only on topics.

I, 27: I composed the following poem on the topic “An Autumn Evening” and requested the old Retired Emperor to criticize it:

Ushi tote mo	Wretched it may be,
Yo mo itowareji	But I cannot say that I despise
Waga mi yo ni	The world I live in—
Aran kagiri no	Not as long as it offers me
Aki no yūgure	The beauty of the autumn dusk.

In his critique, His Majesty wrote, “How touched I am to learn that all your life your heart has been moved by the color of dusk in the autumn light,” and I was told that he admired the poem exceedingly. I would not be able to write a poem as good as this any more.<sup>16</sup>

The message is clear: that the poem, originally written for a poem contest commissioned by Retired Emperor Go-Komatsu (on the third day of the Tenth Month of Eikyō 1 [1429]),<sup>17</sup> was explicitly composed on a conventional topic does not deter the emperor from taking it as representing the poet’s personal feelings and not as the musings of some imagined persona.

But this is only one statement, and it deals with only the “consumer” side of the issue, which is the easiest one to accept. And on the whole it must be admitted that Shōtetsu’s comments in *Shōtetsu monogatari* are not enough to make a strong case for the persistence of personal “investment” in the handling of topics at the time of composition. Furthermore, when one turns through the pages of his personal anthology, *Sōkonshū* 草根集 (“Grass Roots Collection”) in *Shinpen kokka taikan*—the most widely available text—one finds that virtually every poem is prefaced by a conventional topic,

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> *Sōkonshū* 3646 in volume 8 of the standard *Shinpen kokka taikan* edition (Kadokawa shoten, 1990). In the more “journalistic” *Shikashū taisei* edition, which gives the information about the circumstances of the poem’s composition noted here, the poem is #1330. See Wakashi kenkyūkai, eds., *Shikashū taisei*, vol. 5 (Meiji shoin, 1974).

and only by a topic.<sup>18</sup> Fortunately, however, Shōtetsu's anthology is a rarity in that it exists in more than one version, and the other version—the earlier one, almost certainly, which in addition to noting the topics also contains many “journalistic” notes—tells a different story.<sup>19</sup> On the mundane level, it reveals something that might seem of interest only to textual scholars: that as the years went by personal anthologies were probably designed first and foremost as handbooks for students, which meant in this case that someone at some time organized all of Shōtetsu's poems according to topic, for easy reference, deleting all extraneous information in the process.<sup>20</sup> But, needless to say, that information, fragments of which happily do survive in the earlier version of the anthology, is precisely what is of interest here, because it shows convincingly that many of one poet's *daiei* in fact contained references that help us retrieve the “personal” dimensions of their production.

An obvious example of what I am asserting appears in poem 8709 of the later version of *Sōkonshū*, followed in brackets here by the head-note that precedes that same poem—which is one of a group of five poems evidently composed on a particular social occasion, all of them on different topics—in the earlier, journal version.

“Rain at A Grass Hut”

Truly  
     a cottage  
 where the leaves  
                     on the grasses  
 have blossomed  
                     as words—  
 a place, too,  
                     blessed abundantly  
 by the work  
                     of rain and dew.

<sup>18</sup> See note 17 for bibliographical information.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Not coincidentally, it was of course during the late Muromachi period that the compilation of *ruidai kashū* 類題歌集, large anthologies in which poems were organized by topic for ease of reference, became a major trend. The later versions of Shōtetsu's personal anthology are one evidence of this development.

*koto no ha no / hana saku kusa no / iori kana / sazo ametsuyu mo / megumi okiken*

[Headnote for Poems 2040–2044 in Journal Version: Written on the 10th day of the Tenth Month {of 1433} when Mochitoyo, Assistant in the Board of Censors, and others came for the first meeting after the new cottage of Sōzei had been completed.]

Succinctly put, the original headnote makes it clear that the poem in question is an occasional poem on a topic that was probably chosen to allow Shōtetsu to congratulate his personal friend and disciple Takayama Sōzei (d. 1455) on his newly constructed cottage, a specific “hut” that would of course become a site of literary activity. In choosing to eliminate the headnote, the editor of the later version of Shōtetsu’s anthology, however, presented the text as something else, a simple *daiei* that deals in a general way with the idea of rain blessing the grounds around a grass hut. In the later version of *Sōkonshū* it appears, in fact, as one of a group of five poems composed at various different times in Shōtetsu’s career on the conventional topic, “Rain at A Grass Hut,” with no mention whatsoever of the occasion on which it was composed.<sup>21</sup>

It is not the case, however, that only the strictly “occasional” poems in Shōtetsu’s personal anthology have been recontextualized in this way, or, in other words, that poems originally written on topics probably chosen to elicit personal statements were sometimes later recorded in such a way as to obscure those original circumstances. (A practice that one might argue as having more to do with editors than poets.) Other examples, which I note here without commentary, make it clear that the “personal touch” was also applied to *daiei* that were not so clearly intended for personal treatment. As above, I quote first the poems as they appear in the later version of *Sōkonshū* and then note the headnotes that precede the same poems in the earlier, “journal” version.

#### 1. Handbook Version 407: “Haze on the Lake”

Above the water,

<sup>21</sup> Poems 8708–8712.



for the wind to strike, was living in a mountain village in a place called Taka in Yamashiro, which meant I was able to visit her only rarely. When it snowed, I of course worried even more about how she would be getting along. Feeling a little envious, then, I sent another poem off, accompanied by a pine bough heavy with snow: “With these few words / I turn my thoughts toward her—/ but little comfort / will they be to my mother / in her snowy mountain home.”

The following is from among twenty poems I composed that same night, looking out at the snow:]

3. Handbook Version 1366: “Blossoms, in Seclusion”

This year  
                   for springtime  
 I stay  
                   in the capital,  
 but with my blinds down—  
 blossoms deep in the mountains  
 rising up  
                   into my mind.

*kono haru wa / miyako nagara ni / tarekomete / ōyamazakura zo / omokage  
 ni tatsu*

[From Headnotes for Poems 9707–9721 of Journal Version: On the morning of the fourteenth day {of the Second Month of 1457} my chronic ailment flared up, and by the seventeenth it looked like it might be the end. I wasn’t even aware of the people who came to visit, but then, who knows why, I began to recover, little by little . . . and by the end of the Third Month I was somewhat better. It was then that I received a message from the Master of Palace Repairs saying that there were still some blossoms left in his garden, that it would be a shame if I didn’t see any at all this spring, that I really should get outdoors, and so forth. So kind were his remonstrances that I went and had myself helped out onto the veranda and looked at the blossoms. This was written for a fifty-poem sequence:]

## 4. Handbook Version 3994: “Looking at the Moon”

Soon the end  
                   must come  
 for this Longest Month of all—  
 yet still  
           I live on  
 into autumn,  
                   with the moon  
 above  
           in the sky at dawn.

*nagatsuki mo / tsuki ni zo kurasu / kono aki mo / inochi no uchi no / ariake  
 no sora*

[From Headnotes for Poems 6513–6518 in Journal Version: At dawn on the second day of the Eighth Month {of 1450}, my chronic ailment flared up again, and I thought it might be a more serious bout than the previous ones and went to no meetings at all, instead spending the month at home . . . Then on the seventeenth day of the Ninth Month, while I was still not feeling well, some people came by saying they wanted to visit, and we composed a round of poems:]

## 5. Handbook Version 4011: “The Moon—a Friend of Many Autumns”

The autumns  
                   passed by—  
 and here I am, old,  
                   with friends  
 no longer around.  
 Not abandoning me, though—  
 is the moon  
                   that comes visiting.

*aki o hete / oi wa tomo naku / narinikeri / misutegataku ya / tsuki no touran*

[Headnote for Poem 2194 in Journal Version: On the sixteenth day {of the Eighth Month of 1434}, Sōzei, Toshinaga, Chikamasa, and some others came to my cottage. Arguing that the

moon that night was too beautiful to be forgotten, they insisted on another round of poems, so we drew for topics:]

6. Handbook Version 4750: “Chrysanthemums Extending Life”

Surely  
     the kindness  
 of dew bestowed  
                     on blossoms  
 has granted long life  
 to all  
     who each fall gather  
 at the  
     chrysanthemum market.

*hana no tsuyu / ukete ya toshi o / nobaeken / kiku uru ichi no / aki no morobito*

[Headnote for Poem 2546 in Journal Version: On the ninth day of the Ninth Month {of 1447} I had received an invitation to come to the house of the Master of Palace Repairs to celebrate the Chrysanthemum Festival, but did not go because I was feeling unwell. These topics were sent to me.]

7. Handbook Version 4981: “First Winter Storm”

In the Godless Month,  
 on a mountain  
                     named *Storm*  
 for the way  
                     its winds  
 scatter red leaves  
                     on the ground—  
 there only fall’s shadow  
                     remains.

*kaminazuki / momiji chirishiku / yama no na no / arashi no kage ni / nokoru aki kana*

[Headnote for Poem 2549 in Journal Version: On the sixth day

of the Tenth Month {of Bunnan 1447}, I went along with Bi-zen Lay-Monk Jōgan and some others to see the leaves at Arashiyama. At a place called Shūryūin we drew for topics:]

8. Handbook Version 5996: “Feeling Far Away, in the Snow”

On Poetry Way

I stop

the pony of my heart  
for a brief rest—  
thinking back

on that snow  
on the fields round

Sano Ford.

*yamatouta no / michi ni kokoro no / koma tomete / sano no watari no / yuki  
o shi zo omou*

[Headnote for Poem 7804 in Journal Version: A poem written on pocket paper when there was a service held before a portrait of Teika at the home of the Master of Palace Repairs on the 29th day {of the Eleventh Month of 1452}.]

9. Handbook Version 8711: “Rain at A Grass Hut”

When I muse

alone  
amidst showers  
in the night,  
what seems as rampant  
as the grasses  
on my thatched roof  
are the troubles  
of the world.

*yoru no ame ni / hitori omoeba / io fukishi / chigusa ni uki wa / kono yo  
narikeri*

[Headnote for Poems 8679–8682 in Journal Version: From around the Eighth Month {of 1454}, the world was in an uproar because of events in the Hatakeyama House, and then



poetry gathering held beneath an actual portrait of Fujiwara no Teika, no doubt with his famous poems in mind, including this one (*SKKS* 671) to which Shōtetsu alludes unmistakably:

No shelter  
                                   in sight  
 to give my pony  
                                   a rest  
 and brush off  
                                   my sleeves—  
 in the fields  
                                   around Sano Ford  
 on a snowy evening.

*koma tomete / sode uchiharau / kage mo nashi / sano no watari no / yuki no yūgure*

Similarly, poems 3, 4, and 6 are in their headnotes revealed as commentary on the state of the poet's own health rather than on the more general theme of mortality, while poem 2 refers specifically to the health of Shōtetsu's aging mother and poem 9 to the unsteady political "health" of the surrounding world. In each case, the headnote makes known the presence of a small community of poets bound together by relationships that seem to be well established—relationships that, however obscure to us now and however invisible to readers of the texts in the handbook version of the anthology, were clearly "subtexts" for the poems when they were written.

More noteworthy in this respect than any of the other poems is poem 5, which offers a glimpse of Shōtetsu at what other sources tell us was a crucial juncture in his life. We unfortunately do not know if all of the other topics were chosen by the poets who convened at his hut on the 16th of the Eighth Month of Eikyō 6 [1434]; but at the very least we can say with confidence that Shōtetsu's topic seems to have been chosen to fit the occasion, and that his poem likewise conveys a personal sentiment. Even on the surface, the references to friends and the moon can be related directly to the circumstances of the moment. And other, even more personal readings become possible when we learn that this was the time in his life when the poet was under censure by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshinori (1394–1441) while



author speaks for himself in terms that would have been immediately understood as personal by those around him. That the poem *can* function as purely a *daiei*, then, should not mean that it *must* function only as a *daiei*. The reference to the earlier poem is not clear enough to be called *honkadori*, perhaps; yet there can be no doubt that Shōtetsu knew Jien's work well, and that he should reveal to his friends through a rather oblique allusion his own sense of having been abandoned seems entirely in keeping with the setting and something that the topic may even have been chosen to facilitate.

One can of course argue with this reading, as one can argue that Shōtetsu in his approach to *daiei* was probably an exception, since he is known for being exceptional in other ways. But his many comments about *dai* in *Shōtetsu monogatari* do not, in fact, show any such resistance to the practice; on the contrary, they place him squarely in the mainstream of late medieval discourse on the subject. Rather than doubt Shōtetsu's viability as a test of the provenance of *dai*, then, we may be justified in reversing the process and using his example to consider what writing poems on *dai* actually amounted to in practice. For in Shōtetsu's case we have evidence that, again in practice, *dai* were actively toyed with, manipulated—treated, in other words, as other kinds of conventions—sometimes, at least, a means and not an end.

I do not intend by this to argue that we now have license to read all late medieval poems as direct personal expressions arising from private circumstances. My contention is more modest: that there is evidence to suggest that the standard account of *dai*, which is one of the devices by which late medieval poetry is routinely condemned as overly abstract and cerebral, needs to be challenged. In fact, things in Shōtetsu's day were probably closer to what the situation had been in Teika's day than is usually recognized. We know from *Shōji hyakushu* (1200) for instance, that even in a formal hundred-poem sequence Teika wrote poems with distinctly personal resonances—in fact, distinctly personal grievances.<sup>24</sup> So, I contend, did Shōtetsu, and, I would guess, most of his contemporaries. In this sense, the

<sup>24</sup> See Robert H. Brower, *Fujiwara Teika's Hundred-Poem Sequence of the Shōji Era, 1200, MN Monograph 55* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1978), pp. 30–32, 103–113.

evidence of Shōtetsu's anthology hints at an important but unremarked feature of practice, namely, that the ability of a poet, particularly a professional master such as Shōtetsu in a fairly informal setting,<sup>25</sup> to treat his assigned topic with a "personal touch" was probably considered a test of competence—albeit one the evidence for which might be lost when the poem was recontextualized. That personal touch could of course be achieved in more ways than one, but certainly the interjection of "private" knowledge known to the participants in a poetic gathering could be depended upon to impress, as it evidently did in the case of a poetry meeting described in *Tōyashū kikigaki* 東野州聞書 (mid-fifteenth century), a memoir written by Shōtetsu's sometime student Tō no Tsuneyori 東常縁 (1401–84):

When on duty on the seventeenth day of the Ninth Month of 1449 . . . I heard this story from Antō Enshū. It must have been in the Eighth Month, there was a [poetry] meeting in a place thatched with grass and reeds at Butsuchi-in cloister at Miidera, and Shōgetsu-an composed this poem on the topic, "Early Autumn in the Mountains"

Down  
     blows the wind,  
 forcing all  
     on the mountain  
 to admit  
     fall has come—  
 except  
     where it cannot see  
 what is hidden by grassy eaves.<sup>26</sup>

*fuku kaze mo / yama o oshinami / kuru aki ni / shirarenu noki no / kusagakuretsutsu*

That Tsuneyori appends no commentary onto this poem I take to mean simply that it was noteworthy, praiseworthy. And if not for

<sup>25</sup> My assumption here is that the interjection of personal elements would have been less acceptable in more formal settings such as poem contests and dedicatory works, although that, too, is an assumption that perhaps needs more scrutiny.

<sup>26</sup> *NKT*, vol. 5, p. 335; see also *ST*, vol. 5, 5921.



*nasake aru / tomo koso kataki / yo narikeri / hitori ame kiku / aki no yosugara*

For what reason I don't know, this poem struck deep in my heart,  
and so I became his disciple.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, Tamehide's poem was written on a conventional topic, his treatment of which displayed his mastery of poetic technique; and one could also argue that Tamehide's poem makes an ideological claim about the refined nature of his sensibility that was meant to be aesthetically "attractive" in itself. But is one to believe that it was primarily the manipulation of such conventions that so inspired Ryōshun to reply with the social act of becoming Tamehide's student? When he says that the poem "struck deep in my heart," does he mean only that he was moved by Tamehide's artistry rather than by the genuineness of the emotion expressed by the poem? It seems more reasonable to conclude that what Ryōshun was responding to was a combination of the two—artistry and emotion, with the latter perhaps arising from circumstances of the moment now unknown to us. If, knowing what we do about *dai* and other mediating factors in the composition of *uta*, we cannot naively assert that Tamehide's poem must have been "about" the poet himself on some *actual* rainy night; then neither can we, knowing what we now know about the actual treatment of *dai* in Shōtetsu's poems, naively assume that Tamehide's poem is a "pure" fiction. If only somewhat obliquely, in ways that are not always immediately apparent to readers today, there is evidence that the "personal"—even in the most literal sense—persisted as a consideration in medieval poetic practice, for both poets and their audiences.

<sup>27</sup> *Rakusho roken*, in *NKT*, vol. 5, p. 202.