



## Conversations with Shotetsu.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

*Conversations with Shōtetsu*. Translated by Robert H. Brower, with Introduction and Notes by Steven D. Carter. Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1992. x + 225 pages. \$35.00.

A GENERATION and more of students of Japanese literature have been guided by the late Professor Robert H. Brower's studies of court poetry. Many, perhaps, were first attracted to the field by reading Brower and Earl Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry*, 1961, a work still unmatched not only in its breadth but in the critical sensitivities that bring to life a vast array of poems. Subsequently Brower turned to the poetry and poetics of the thirteenth century, specifically of Fujiwara Teika, 1162–1241, publishing a series of translations and critical studies of his works.

It was fitting that Brower finally directed his attention to Shōtetsu, 1381–1459, the last great classical waka poet, who sought to recover in his works Teika's innovative qualities. Thus at his untimely death in 1988, Brower had translated *Shōtetsu Monogatari*, leaving the writing of the Introduction and notes to Steven D. Carter. The translation displays the rigor and lucidity that characterized Brower's work throughout his career. The poems are elegantly rendered, preserving the brevity and cadences of the originals. Carter's introductory essay maintains these high standards and provides the context that renders meaningful many of Shōtetsu's brief statements.

*Shōtetsu Monogatari* consists of two volumes, compiled perhaps in part by Shōtetsu himself, in part by one of the poet's disciples, and records rather randomly a variety of information: bits of Shōtetsu's poetic biography, an articulation of his aesthetic ideals, exegeses of poems, poetic anecdotes, advice for novice poets, and such specialist information as the date of Hitomaro's death. Students of waka, especially of the Shinkokin period, will appreciate the evaluation of some characteristic poems of that period, the delineation as *yūgen* of what Shōtetsu believed to be the central quality of Teika's verse, and the study of *honkadōri*. *Conversations with Shōtetsu* makes all the more exciting the work of a poet who claimed for waka an ever-renewable creativity in a period when so many were content to produce feeble, formulaic verse.

Shōtetsu began his poetic training under the guidance of Imagawa Ryōshun, and *Shōtetsu Monogatari* contains many expressions of the author's irritation at the obtuseness of contemporary poets and his disapproval of the conservatism of his Nijō rivals, 'who [would] not tolerate the slightest divergence from tradition' (p. 121). Some of his anecdotes, such as the one in which he reports Asukai Masatsune's propensity to take phrases from other people's poems and incorporate them into his own, discredit his rivals' ancestors. At times Shōtetsu's criticism of his contemporaries seems less than fair, as when he castigates them for failing to comprehend a poem in which he uses the phrase *naka no koromo* and for mistakenly believing that this was an

allusion to *Genji Monogatari*. Since the use of the phrase is limited almost solely to that monogatari and to Shōtetsu's verse, their reaction is understandable.

In the same anecdote, Shōtetsu remarks, 'I tried to treat [*naka no koromo*] in a novel way,' and throughout *Shōtetsu Monogatari* he speaks of his efforts and the frustrations he met in trying to compose verse that was more than simply 'good enough'. He praises Jien's ingenuity in bringing his materials together in unexpected ways, but it was in Teika's compositions, especially of the Shinkokin period, that Shōtetsu found his poetic ideal of highly wrought, often ingenious conceptions and expressions and his aesthetic ideal of *yūgen*. As Carter argues, by the time Shōtetsu wrote his treatise, he had come to see little to recommend in any of the competing schools of poetry, each of which sought to limit poetic practice to its own favored style.

As Carter also notes, Shōtetsu substituted the term *yūgen* for Teika's *yojō yōen*, misled by his reading of several Teika forgeries in which a style of mystery and depth is described and, further, influenced by Chōmei's description of *yūgen* in *Mumyōshō*. Whatever he chose to call it, Shōtetsu grasped an essential quality of Teika's verse. Of Teika's three exemplary poems that Shōtetsu quotes from *Roppyakuban Uta-awase*, two are criticized by the opposing team as 'incomprehensible'. Of the third, the judge Shunzei himself remarks that the poem's conception does not seem to be clearly expressed in the diction. But for Shōtetsu, these qualities, positively re-interpreted as a complex evocativeness and an unearthly, romantic beauty, were precisely the strengths of Teika's verse and of his own.

*Shōtetsu Monogatari* reveals various aspects that distinguish poetic practice from that of Teika's period. Although not to the same degree as the renga masters of the following generation who would wander the provinces, Shōtetsu faced the need to address pupils for whom waka was increasingly an artifact from a different time and of an unfamiliar class. Certainly the many instructions included here concerning the social conventions of waka practice were for such an audience. It is interesting, too, that Shōtetsu recommends students to attend poetry contests where judgments were made by group decision. Poets would there discover a community of critical judgments within which their powers of analysis could be sharpened. Finally, the work includes extensive exegeses of poems, most often his own or Teika's. In part, this can be explained by their difficulty, although admittedly no earlier poet so strongly recommended his own verse. More important, Shōtetsu's readings underscore his emphasis, not on learning and knowledge but on an understanding of the nature of poetry. This involved for him entering into a (fictional) speaker's situation and feelings that gave rise to and are expressed in a poem. Such a process mirrors a poet's engagement with the topic in the act of composition.

Both *Shōtetsu Monogatari* and Carter's introductory essay reveal the poet's intense devotion to waka and courtly literature—a devotion strongly evident in his studies of and lectures on *Genji Monogatari*. We can readily believe that Shōtetsu brought to the latter the same gift of imaginative re-creation of setting and emotions that characterized his readings of poems. In his personal collection, *Sōkonshū*, Shōtetsu has left us more than ten thousand poems; fire destroyed an earlier 27,000 poems in 1432, along with his entire library. He speaks of the lifetime of 'unremitting discipline' required of a poet, who must compose 'one poem after another lightly and easily but always pressing forward to the next one' (p. 163). Such a prodigious production speaks of creative energies to which all external circumstances were finally irrelevant. *Shōtetsu*

*Monogatari* offers a portrait of a poet who demanded excellence and creativity in a period when few of his contemporaries could achieve or even aspire to such a standard.

Not one of Shōtetsu's compositions was included, however, in the last imperial anthology, *Shinshoku Kokinshū*, 1439, yet he continued to teach and compose for the remaining twenty years of his life. The title of his *Sōkonshū* translates as 'A Collection of Grass Roots', and its preface tells us that although the grass may be cut, burned, or exposed to the autumn frost, new life will spring forth from the roots—and that this is symbolic of Shōtetsu's devotion to waka.

By Shōtetsu's time new and sometimes competing art forms and aesthetics had arisen. Linked verse was one of them. Thus a figure such as Nijō Yoshitomo, 1302–1388, the first great renga master and the last to be a high-ranking courtier, was drawn to this form. Shōtetsu's most gifted pupil was the waka/renga poet Shinkei, who in turn instructed Sōgi in linked verse. Another of Shōtetsu's contemporaries was the noh actor, playwright, and theoretician Zeami, 1363–1443. Arguably such figures infused the practice of their respective arts with the conservatism of court aesthetics, but the renga poets at least sought in linked verse a new freedom of expression. Significantly, Shinkei's aesthetic ideals moved away from Shōtetsu's courtly romanticism.

Shōtetsu worshipped a poet who had been active a century and half earlier and in different historical circumstances. He was right to look to Teika for support of his own innovative impulses, and he speaks of the need to 'emulate his style and spirit and cast of mind,' and not 'merely to imitate his diction and cadences' (p. 62). The question of how successful Shōtetsu was in his endeavor still remains. If the innovative qualities of his verse were merely those pioneered by Teika, Shōtetsu could be seen as a conservative figure, despite his invocation of Teika. We might ask, too, how recoverable Teika's 'spirit and cast of mind' were in the later poet's age; Shōtetsu revered a master whom he tried to emulate and Teika had not. Thus future issues for study might be such matters as influences of Shōtetsu's verse, not mentioned in *Shōtetsu Monogatari*, from sources such as renga and the Chinese poetry and poetics introduced in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods.

As noted above, the translation and the accompanying notes and essay are meticulous. Only minor questions arise. In the *hototogisu* poem, for example, on p. 128, the *sugi* in the phrase *satsuki no sugi no kogakure* seems to pivot to mean not only the cedars of the Fifth Month but also 'the Fifth Month is past.' The poem that Shōtetsu attributes to Shunzei's Daughter, p. 83, may be a garbled version of a *Shinkokinshū* poem (14:1300) by Fujiwara Kintsune. A simple genealogical chart of the members of the various poetic families would have been helpful in the introductory essay. There are a few typos, including '1450's', p. 9, concerning the period of Ryōshun's poetic activity, that should be 1350's; 'Shōgetsu' for Shōtetsu, p. 35; 'Minamoto no Tsunenobu' should read Minamoto no Toshiyori, p. 133, n. 398; and 'Takahiro's grandson' should read Takasuke's grandson, p. 162, n. 539.

But these minor problems detract not in the least from the value of *Conversations with Shōtetsu* in making widely available the poetry and poetics of a figure who has been neglected for too long.

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