String of Beads: Complete Poems of Princess Shikishi.

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BOOK REVIEWS

String of Beads: Complete Poems of Princess Shikishi. Translated by Hiroaki Sato. SHAPS Library of Translations. University of Hawaii Press, 1993. x + 177 pages. $34.00.

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THE publication of a set of translations of the complete poems of Shikishi Naishinnō in Hiroaki Sato's *String of Beads* is a welcome event. Shikishi, or Shokushi, 1159?-1201, was one of the leading poets of the court in the late twelfth century. The daughter of Emperor Go-Shirakawa, she studied poetry with Fujiwara Shunzei, and thus was closely associated with the emergence of what was to become the Shinkokin style. In 1181, Shunzei brought his son Teika to her attention, and entries in the latter's diary in the following years disclose that this was the first of many visits. Shunzei also included nine of her poems in *Senzaishū*. Shikishi's poetic gifts were further recognized in *Shinkokinshū*, which records forty-nine of her compositions, the fifth highest number among all the poets represented and the first among the women.

The importance of Shikishi's verse, however, does not lie solely in her status as a leading practitioner of the Shinkokin style. One of the most striking features about her poems is that they seem to invite an autobiographical reading, in a manner in which the compositions of her contemporaries do not. This is so despite the fact that most of her extant poems are hyakushu-uta or other compositions on set topics. Thus Shikishi's poems provide valuable examples of how tradition may be shaped to personal expressive needs.

Kamo Shrine Priestess during her girlhood, Shikishi seems to have passed her life as a series of withdrawals from the turbulent world of twelfth-century Kyoto. Like most of the imperial princesses who served as shrine priestesses, Shikishi remained unmarried after resigning her post. There are no contemporary records of any romantic involvements in her life. Likewise, there are no records of her participation in or sponsorship of any poetry contests; her high rank may have precluded the former, but not the latter. Barely a handful of her epistolary verse survives. In 1197 she became a nun and died four years later.

Thus the speakers in Shikishi's poems are often persons separated from nature and life, observers of what lies beyond their dwellings. Fully a fifth of the seasonal poems in the three hyakushu that comprise the core of her personal collection speak either of gazing (*nagamu*) or looking (*miru*); nearly a third of the seasonal verse of the same sequences refer to some part of a dwelling, more often than not one either physically

or psychically distant from other people. In her love poetry, Shikishi favors the topic of *shinobu koi*, which explores a love uncommunicated to a beloved or concealed from others. What little we know of Shikishi's life readily suggests that her solitary speakers are self-portraits.

At the same time, the speakers of Shikishi's formal hyakushu poems also meet the requisites of topic compositions. Whatever Shikishi expresses of herself in her verse is thus always mediated by the anterior conditions of poetic tradition and the technique of allusive variations. In particular, the waka canon, *Genji Monogatari*, and Chinese verse provided her with the motif of the unloved woman dwelling in solitude, which so many of her poems explore.

Sato's Introduction explores a number of issues useful to the understanding of Shikishi's verse. Especially helpful is the biographical section that brings together the few and scattered sources of information about her life and provides as well a picture of the lives of the Kamo Shrine priestesses. Portions of the Introduction that give an overview of the hyakushu format, the prosody of tanka and some of its techniques, as well as the annotated listing at the end of the book of the major anthologies and tales, should prove particularly useful to the non-specialist reader. (But one small correction should be made in the Further Notes, I-5: Fujiwara Yoshitsune was Kanezane's son, not his brother.)

Readers, however, might have been further enlightened concerning the intent and poetic effects created through allusion (*honkadori* and *honzetsu*). It is useful to be reminded that ' "the modern cult of originality" is certainly modern' (p. 23), but one wishes to see as well some exploration of the uses to which the Shinkokin-period poets put the intertextuality of their compositions. The acceptance and systemization of the technique of allusion—Sato quotes Teika's rules and Shunzei's well-known statement concerning allusions to the *Genji*—are not merely practical responses to the inevitable similarity among poems composed in severely restricted circumstances.

In Shinkokin poetry, allusion actualizes the principle of 'old words, new conceptions', the writing of waka by re-using primarily the vocabulary of the *Sandaishū*. The technique brings about variously nuanced dialogues between *honka/honzetsu* and the new compositions that become part of the meaning of the latter. *Honkadori* is, on the one hand, a means of expressing *hon'i*, the timeless 'quintessence of things', a comprehension of which latter-day poets could acquire through immersion in the sensibilities of the poetic canon. On the other hand, temporality often re-asserts itself when poets thematize the very absence of a past whose traces their speakers seek. One particularly misses a further discussion of *honkadori* since Sato, in the notes to his translations, indicates Shikishi's myriad foundation poems and prose contexts.

It is for the translation, of course, that most readers will come to *String of Beads*. Only one other publication, Burton Watson's translation of Saigyō's verse, comes to mind as a comparably lengthy treatment of a single poet's compositions. Among his translations, Sato has even included the series of poems that Shikishi sent to Shunzei some months after his wife's death. They appear neither in the Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei nor in the Kokka Taikan texts of their respective personal collections. With their allusions to the *Genji*, these poems tell of a shaping of personal experiences and emotions as reprises of what has, once and for all, already been felt and said. They are important documents in the history of the relationship of the *Genji* to later waka. In addition, Sato has not attached extensive explanatory notes to the verse, so that

readers experience his translations first and foremost as poetry, rather than occasions for exegesis.

More problematically, Sato has translated the poems, as has been his practice, as one-line verse in an effort to 'recreate the original format in translation' (p. 30). He argues here and in an earlier article in MN (42:3) that waka poets had no notion of poetic lines stacked one against another as in Western or even Chinese poetry, and concludes that the practice of 'automatically equating each syllabic unit with a "line"' is without historical foundation (p. 26). Several questions remain, however. Can such a monolinear poetic form be transferred successfully into English or other Western languages, where it is essentially alien? Put another way, bearing in mind that all translations sacrifice much, what is sacrificed both of our readings of the translations as plausible poetry in English and of our experiences of the originals? Perhaps, greater efforts should be made to retain something as fundamental as the one-line form. But this form may be too spare and formless to serve effectively, save rarely, as a poem in English.

Compare the following poem and its translations that Sato quotes in his Introduction (p. 28). The first translation is Sato's, the second, Earl Miner's.

Tama no o yo taeneba taene nagaraeba shinoburu koto no yowari mo zo suru

String of beads, if you must break, break; if you last longer, my endurance is sure to weaken

O cord of life!
Threading through the jewel of my soul,
If you will break, break now;
I shall weaken if this life continues,
Unable to bear such fearful strain.

Sato's translations here and throughout the volume take up roughly the same space as his rōmaji transcriptions and on the average comprise, as he notes, fewer syllables. His translations look like their originals on the pages. But this visual aesthetics is achieved only through the use of spare, unpadded translations. Too many words, and a 'line' would begin to look like a paragraph. Sato's translations add virtually no words to the originals and are remarkably faithful to their order of words and images.

In contrast, re-formatted without line breaks, Miner's translation would be a full type-line longer than Sato's. Part of the added length comes from his richer treatment of *tama no o*. The pivot of *tama*, meaning jewel or bead, with 'soul', which Sato does not bring out, becomes in Miner's version a metaphor expressive of delicate luminosity that suggests the fragility of the speaker's life. (It is true that Sato's 'string of beads' is more accurate than Miner's 'jewel'.) Likewise, the addition of 'now' in Miner's third line conveys the desperation of the speaker, who faces self-betrayal. As a metaphoric image for life, *tama no o* objectifies one part of the speaker's divided self. In her closing couplet, Shikishi sets up *shinoburu koto* as another. Paradoxically, the breaking of the one will forestall the weakening of the other. Sato's abstract noun 'endurance' nicely parallels 'string of beads', but Miner's expanded 'Unable to bear such fearful strain' underscores the physicality with which the speaker portrays parts of her psyche.

We should also briefly touch upon the issue of the cadences with which a poem unfolds. Admittedly, syllabic units and lines should not be simply equated. Nonetheless,

in the absence of syllabic units in an English translation, the unfolding cadences one hears in the Japanese can perhaps be best mimicked through lineation. Further, poets of the Shinkokin period experimented widely with such devices as caesuras that broke the linear flow of a waka, juxtaposing image cluster with image cluster, expression of feelings with an image, or two or more conflicting emotions. Lineation forces greater attention on each of these units and allows the reader to see these juxtapositions in a way that monolinear translations do not. Take, for example, the following autumn poem, one of Shikishi's most characteristic and successful pieces (p. 85):

Kiri no ha mo fumiwake gataku narinikeri kanarazu hito o matsu to wa nakeredo

Coming through paulownia leaves is now difficult, though I do not wait for someone necessarily

Shikishi's original has a strong caesura after *narinikeri* that divides the poem into statements of two conflicting emotional impulses. In the first half, the speaker—most likely a woman—is moved to a concern that the leaves blanketing her long-unvisited and neglected garden would be a nuisance to a caller. In the latter half, she attempts to deny that she awaits a visitor, but the equivocal manner in which the denial is phrased discloses the impossibility of suppressing her feelings. The gap between feeling and its denial, marked in the poem by the strong third-line caesura, cannot be closed. Lineation, perhaps even into two lines, would visually leave that space open.

Sato's commitment to the monolinear form, its attendant brevity, and faithfulness to the word order of the original leads, at times, to somewhat puzzling renditions. For example, where the original is highly compressed and allusive, Sato chooses not to flesh out his translation to clarify its meaning. On p. 78:

Nakitomenu haru o uramuru uguisu no namida narurashi eda ni kakereru

Unable to stop them with cries, resenting spring: this a warbler's tear, clinging to a twig

As Sato notes, 'The first half of the poem . . . . can be understood only if one knows the poems alluded to or the idea behind them,' and his notes provide the *honka* that clarifies what 'them' in his translation refers to. This lack of comprehension is indeed what present-day students of waka experience, but Shikishi's contemporaries would have immediately recognized the allusion. It would be a shame if, in the service of easy comprehensibility, waka translations flattened out all stylistic experimentations. In this case, however, 'them' is already a word that has no equivalent in the original, and the reader's understanding might have been served by its replacement by the phrase 'the blossoms', drawn from the *honka*.

Elsewhere, on p. 44, a translation seems too literal and faithful to the original:

Mataretsuru hima shiramuran honobono to Saho no kawara ni chidori nakunari

As I wait, at every interval it grows white: faintly over Saho riverbed plovers call

Although literally meaning 'interval', *hima* of *hima shiramuran* in this poem indicates the manner in which the dawn sky lightens from the horizon. What interval refers to in the translation is not clear.

The terseness of the translations may also lead to some misunderstanding. For example, on p. 128:

Omokage ni kiku mo kanashiki kusa no hara wakenu sode sae tsuyu zo koboruru

Just hearing about it saddens me: the grassfield I haven't even parted with sleeves, spilling dew

In the original, even the speaker's sleeves, which have not parted the grass, are nonetheless drenched with dew/tears. The translation does not convey this.

Lesser matters include, on p. 83, 'bush clover in the bay of Mano' (*Mano no ura hagi*) for, presumably, 'bush clover along the bay of Mano', and the repeated translation of *sae* as 'lucid', a word that lacks the implications of coldness present in the Japanese. Is *mugura* a species of burdock? Finally, the rōmaji poems are marred by a fair number of transcription errors.

Most of us who translate from Japanese are probably not poets enough to reveal what the original would be like if written in, say, English, or to deform and expand the expressive resources of English through contact with an alien text. We struggle to remain faithful to the devices and semantic patterns of the original, having been captivated precisely by their beauty, while we offer some semblance of a poem in English. We all know the satisfaction of finding equivalents of *kakekotoba*, or preserving a cluster of *engo*, or devising phrases that capture the spirit of the originals. It should also be noted in this regard that Sato's terse translations do yield many effective pieces. To offer just a few: 'water beads from the roof, unstrung, chaotic' (*nuki midaretaru noki no tamamizu*), p. 80; 'I sleep light toward morning' (*utatane no asake*), p. 82; 'sleet slashing aslant as winds vie' (*mizore yokogiri kaze kioitsutsu*), p. 87; 'as I grieve my way into sleep' (*nagekitsutsu uchinuru*), p. 89.

Minor issues aside, Sato's translations make Shikishi's works accessible and attractive to both scholars and general readers. His discussions and experimentations with the monolinear form challenge us as well to rethink the possibilities of and strategies for translating poetic form.

Songs to Make the Dust Dance: The Ryōjin Hishō of Twelfth-Century Japan. By Yung-Hee Kim. University of California Press, 1994. xviii + 222 pages. $47.50.

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YUNG-HEE KIM has taken so thorough a look at *Ryōjin Hishō* that we may never need another monograph on the subject. She provides an account of the historical context of the unlikely preservation of these commoner songs by Emperor Go-Shirakawa, a description of the poetic forms used in the songs, and a discussion of their content illustrated by an ample, representative sampling of individual verses. *Imayō* seem most important for the light they shed on aspects of life untouched by the literature of the elite, and on the social and cultural implications of the aristocracy taking an interest in the arts of the commoners. As poetry, *imayō* are simple, lyrical verses with an appealing directness and vigor, quite the opposite of the contemporary *Shinkokinshū* waka with their rich philosophical complexity and subtle word usage.