



Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

Unforgotten Dreams: Poems by the Zen Monk Shōtetsu. Edited and translated by Steven D. Carter. Columbia University Press, 1997. xxx + 232 pages. Hardback, \$24.50; paper, \$16.50.

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MENTION the name Shōtetsu to a Japan scholar and the response may range from bewilderment to wild guesses. Even those of us who pride ourselves on knowing a bit about medieval literature are not likely to murmur appreciatively when the subject of fifteenth-century waka poets is brought up. This is nothing new for Shōtetsu, 1381–1459, whose journey on the Way of Waka was far from easy and whose modest reputation faded quickly after his death. Like many of his contemporaries, Shōtetsu was familiar with loss. ‘The annals of Japanese literary history abound with stories of suffering literati,’ Steven D. Carter writes in the introduction to *Unforgotten Dreams*. ‘None . . . , however, seems to have borne more grief than the Zen monk Shōtetsu’ (p. xv). When his house burned in 1432, Shōtetsu lost thirty years’ of poetic output. Not long afterward, his estate revenues were confiscated by an unstable shogun who favored Shōtetsu’s literary adversaries. His oblivion was assured when he was denied representation in the only imperial anthology of his time, *Shinshoku Kokinshū*.

Shōtetsu was in fact one of the last great waka poets of premodern times, a radical in an age of rigid conservatism in the waka world. As a self-confessed ‘member of the Teika sect’ (p. xix) who evoked the master’s difficult poetic styles in his own work, Shōtetsu was both a neoclassicist and an uncomfortable reminder to Teika’s lineal descendants of how far the Nijō and Reizei houses had strayed from the great man’s ideals. Yet he was more than a faithful replicator of the Teika style. Although firmly rooted in waka tradition from *Kokinshū* onward and a master of concise poetic expression, Shōtetsu was also a creative poet whose work ranged from the playful and fantastic to moving insights into human nature and Buddhism, and whose diction might adhere to strict court-poetry precedent or move confidently into the uncharted territory of common language.

This extraordinary man has an eloquent champion in Steven Carter, whose gift for reviving the reputations of late medieval literary figures was recently reaffirmed by his biography of Ichijō Kaneyoshi, *Regent Redux*, 1996. Carter’s anthology, *Traditional Japanese Poetry*, 1991, first brought Shōtetsu to the attention of nonspecialists in the West, and was soon followed by his scholarly introduction to *Conversations with Shōtetsu*, 1992, Robert Brower’s translation of *Shōtetsu Monogatari*. Neither of these works, however, exposed readers to a substantial body of Shōtetsu’s poetry. For this reason *Unforgotten Dreams*, a selection of 208 waka drawn principally from Shōtetsu’s massive personal poetry collection, *Sōkonshū*, is particularly welcome.

The present book is intended to represent the wide thematic and technical range of Shōtetsu's poetry. His participation in monthly waka gatherings honed his virtuosity in responding to the prescribed topics (*dai*) given each participant. That a poet needed considerable skill to meet the challenge of a topic is suggested by Carter, who stresses that the *dai* 'is not a "title" attached after the fact but rather the "question" to which the poet has been asked to provide an appropriate answer' (p. xxi). In some cases, the topic appears to be more like a problem or riddle demanding a clever solution. More often than not Shōtetsu rose gracefully to the challenge:

'Love, Related to "Monkey"'

The one
 I glimpsed
 is just so
 hard to catch—
 like
 those monkeys
 vainly
 stretching out
 their hands
 for the moon
 in a valley pool.

*mishi hito mo/kaku zo egataki/taninosaru/
 te ni mo torarenu/mizu no tsukikage* (p. 160)

On the other end of the aesthetic scale, Shōtetsu presented this daringly realistic verse at a poetry gathering:

'Dew in Autumn Paddies'

Breaking
 a new field
 laboring peasants
 work up
 a sweat
 —adding
 to the numbers
 of dewdrops
 on
 the heads
 of grain.

*arata yori/tami no kurushimu/ase ya nao/
 kazu masaruran/ho no ue no tsuyu* (p. 190)

Comparing the futility of one's love to deluded monkeys probably had a certain charm for Shōtetsu's audience, who would have recognized the Buddhist allusion embedded in the poem; but it is not difficult to imagine his more conventional contemporaries being shocked by a poem about sweaty peasants hard at work.

On first reading the subtitle of the book, I was inclined to raise an eyebrow at the designation 'Zen monk'. Technically speaking, that is exactly what Shōtetsu was, but he spent little time in a monastery before striking out on his own as a waka master.

Still, as Carter persuasively points out, Zen conceptions—the beauty of the ordinary, the need to question basic categories such as time and consciousness—were at the heart of Shōtetsu’s poetry, even when it was not overtly religious. What gives particular profundity to his waka is another Zen perception, ‘an awareness of not just the mutability but also of the transmutability of all things—in the way in time one thing becomes another, merges with another, supplements another, in an endless procession for which the poet acts as a kind of artistic amanuensis’ (p. xxiv). The result is poetry that is both strikingly original and in the tradition of Teika and Princess Shikishi:

‘Love, Related to “the Moon”’

Unforgettable
is the image
 that from my eyes
descends in tears—
showering onto
 my sleeves
with moonlight
 at break of day.

*wasurarenu/namida no uchi no/omokage mo/
sode ni koboruru/araike no tsuki* (p. 90)

These examples suggest the extent to which Carter has grasped Shōtetsu’s style and diction, and display an enviable capacity to create translations that are poetry in their own right. Carter’s choice of format, as unconventional to Western waka translators as Shōtetsu’s imagery and diction were five centuries ago, suits the poetry admirably. Spaces and breaks allow the reader of these spare translations to savor each carefully chosen word.

Reviewers are expected to be dissatisfied with something in a book, so I shall dutifully add some suggestions. Carter rightly intends to focus the reader’s attention on Shōtetsu’s poetry and not on scholarly apparatus. Still, those interested in a fuller discussion of Shōtetsu’s life and work could have been directed to the introduction in *Conversations with Shōtetsu*. The poems in *Unforgotten Dreams* could use a bit more annotation. Otherwise readers might miss, say, the allusion to Teika’s famous ‘*Yume no ukihashi*’ poem on p. 95 or grow distracted wondering what was the nature of Shōtetsu’s ‘chronic ailment’ (p. 182n; he suffered from asthma). A few translations do not quite live up to Carter’s high standard, but this is quibbling indeed. Steven Carter is once again to be thanked for bringing a neglected artist into the light, and congratulated on presenting Shōtetsu’s poetry with both faithfulness and grace.