

WHAT LOVE HAS TO DO WITH IT: THE RELATIONSHIP REQUIREMENT IN RENKU

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Renku¹ has deep, historical roots in Japanese court poetry. A strong candidate for the very first recorded renku, a tan renga (“short renga”) appears in the *Man’yōshū*, Japan’s first poetry anthology compiled in the eighth century during the Nara Period. One of the contributors and compilers of the text, Ōtomo no Yakamochi, collaborated with a woman identified only as a Buddhist “nun” (*ama*), to compose the following five-phrase waka poem. The nun supplied the 5-7-5 sound unit “upper verse” (*kami no ku*), to which Yakamochi responded, capping the poem with the 7-7 “lower verse” (*shimo no ku*).

佐保川の水を塞きあげて植ゑし田を
sahogawa no mizu wo sekiagete ueshi ta wo

whoever dammed
Saho River’s waters
to plant rice fields

Nun

刈る早飯は独りなるべし
karu wasai wa hitori narubeshi

should be the only one
to harvest the rice

Ōtomo no Yakamochi²

Donald Keene notes that this first tan renga might be read allegorically, since Yakamochi is thought to have taken “possession” of the nun’s daughter; hence, the harvesting of rice might be a sexual innuendo. The link between the two verses is fairly straightforward: the upper verse

depicts the damming of waters for irrigation and the planting of rice; the lower verse imagines a later point in time when that same rice has been harvested. Unremarkable in its content, the poem *is* remarkable in its mode of composition: a collaboration of two people, a woman and a man, creating together.

On the page, as mentioned, this poem looks like a waka (later known as tanka): the most popular short form of verse at the time and for many centuries thereafter. In the Heian Period (794–1185), for example, Lady Murasaki Shikibu includes 795 waka in her *Tale of Genji*. Lovers and would-be lovers often wrote waka as a poetry of courtship: a call-and-response interchange in which one poet would submit a verse and the other would answer it in kind. Yakamochi and his nun took this spirit of communication-through-poetry to a new level: the composition of a single verse jointly written, thus transforming the 5-7-5 upper verse of a waka into a hokku, and the 7-7 lower verse into what renku tradition would later come to call waki.

From its origin in the effete ambiance of the imperial court in Nara, renku spread over the succeeding centuries to become a popular group activity for merchants, samurai, and, most significantly, Buddhist priests—coming to possess an elaborate set of rules but always retaining the obligatory “love verses.” To this day the requirement that renku must devote verses to loving relationships remains ... but why? Given that renku was shaped by monks who wished to fashion it into a Buddhist ritual for transcending worldly attachments—as Gary L. Ebersole has shown in an important article³—does its erotic content remain simply as a useless vestigial appendage of its evolution, or does it continue to play a vital, organic role?

Bashō, the greatest renku master of the Edo period, famously commented, “Once a renku comes off the writing table, it instantly becomes wastepaper.”⁴ Some people take this statement at face value and assume that Bashō was saying that the only thing that matters in renku is the experience of its making. Once it is “off on the table”—that is, finished—it is worthless. Other readers believe that Bashō was speaking in hyperbole, perhaps applying a heavy dose of Japanese humility in referring to a finished, exquisite renku as trash. After all, Bashō was a careful editor of the

renku that he led in the role of *sabaki*; after the compositional session he would often make corrections to prepare the poem for a wider readership. If the finished renku was literally “trash,” why would he bother with such meticulous polishing? Whether Bashō was being literal or hyperbolic, he clearly felt that the process of making it has more value than the final product.

The creation myth in Japan reports that the world emerged from the lovemaking of two divine beings: Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto. When they conducted the proper mating ceremony successfully (after one false start and the creation of devil offspring), Izanami gave birth to the eight great islands of Japan, and many other island-children were born later. Our world, as the Japanese people understood it in ancient times, was not the product of a solitary Creator. In their cultural imagination, it was born from a divine act of love. A deep lesson embedded in the Izanagi-Izanami myth is that relationship is fruitful beyond calculation. As Shokan Tadashi Kondo has pointed out to me, one reason that love is intrinsic to renku is because, in the ancient Japanese view, love is intrinsic to existence itself. When renku poets collaborate—quieting the clamoring inner voices of ego to hear and welcome the voices of others around the writing table—something similar to the miracle of Izanagi and Izanami occurs. Whatever the number of participating poets, if they stifle their individualism and tailor their contributions with sensitivity to all previous verses, generously handing off the poem in good order to the next poet; they are behaving lovingly. Emulating the synergistic power of Izanagi and Izanami, poets link their verses to their companions’ previously written ones, producing a dazzling progression of images and ideas that no one of them, working alone, could ever possibly achieve: *our* poem, not *my* poem. Perhaps this feeling of losing one’s “self” in a loving, collective effort explains why Bashō favored the writing of renku to its finished product.

A second Japanese cultural reason that love continues to play an intrinsic role in renku is that love represents an important part of human life, hence it is a necessary part of the Mandala of All Creation that the Buddhist shapers of the form chose as a template to guide its composition. Their goal (as Ebersole shows in the essay alluded to previously) was

to create a poetic ritual by which participants would come to realize the unreality of all selves and all objects of selfish desire. In their imaginary journey through our complicated and cluttered universe of attachments, the topic of human love in all its aspects—attraction, courtship, sex, marriage, betrayal, divorce, and so on—poses a special challenge to Buddhists en route to enlightenment. Renku seeks to free minds from a world of attachments only by first plunging those minds deeply *into* that world.

Kobayashi Issa and a friend who wrote under the pen name Kibō composed a thirty-six verse *kasen renku* entitled, “Jump, Flea!” (*nomi tobe yo*) in the summer of 1819. A love verse by Kibō (verse eleven in the sequence) reads, “a room in Eguchi / for just one night / while a cuckoo sings” (*hitoya kase eguchi no yado no hototogisu*).⁵ Issa’s and Kibō’s contemporary audience would have recognized the allusion to a famous Noh play by Zeami, in which a scene taking place in Eguchi includes two characters exchanging songs written by Zeami’s father, Kan’ami. A traveler arrives at the riverport town of Eguchi, where he recalls a story about how, long ago in that same place, the poet-monk Saigyō arrived and asked a courtesan for a room for the night. The monk in Zeami’s play recites aloud Saigyō’s lines, and a passing woman answers him by reciting the courtesan’s lines: Kan’ami’s so-called “Harlot’s Song.” Of course, the woman turns out to be the ghost of the long-ago courtesan who, in the original tale, revealed herself to be, in fact, a manifestation of Fūgen Bosatsu—a bodhisattva. In that story, the pleasure boat that she rode miraculously transformed into a marvelous white elephant that lifted her high into the sky, carrying her off to a Buddhist paradise. Issa answers Kibō’s allusion-packed love verse with the comically dead pan statement, “it’s just a real boat / that’s arriving” (*honto no fune wa tsuite sōrō*). In other words, for Issa, no magical elephant is pulling to shore, offering to carry *him* off into clouds!

Kibō’s summer season love verse about a room for one night in Eguchi, substituting a cuckoo for the singing courtesan, evokes traditional Japanese cultural and literary associations between eroticism and the “floating world” of pleasure districts. However, his reference to passionate worldly attachment also carries with it a Buddhist directive to escape such attachment. Like the courtesan of the story who ultimately rejects mundane life and flies away on a magic elephant, insightful readers might

recognize that the world of erotic attachment is a world of illusions to be transcended. The ultimate goal of every renku is to break free from illusions and attachments. Kibō's love verse, coupled with Issa's tongue-in-cheek response, masterfully foreshadows, and moves the renku a step closer to, its climax of blossoms and enlightenment. Love verses remain essential in renku not just because they were present in its earliest form, but more importantly because they contribute to a ritual of contemplating human attachments in order to, ultimately, let go of them and attain enlightenment.

My own experiences in writing renku alongside Japanese poets have allowed me to begin to understand the importance of, and to appreciate the evolving content of, contemporary love verses. On July 24, 2018, I participated in a bilingual Japanese-English, twenty-verse nijūin renku held at Uematsu Cottage in Susono, Japan, in the foothills of Mount Fuji. Shokan Tadashi Kondo served as our *sabaki*. Two of the love verses of that renku, which we presented the next day to the appreciative mayor of Susono at City Hall, illustrate the range of vision with which contemporary poets of Japan are imagining love these days. A male participant, writing under the pen name, Sano, offered, for verse nine:

広小路うわさの人に身をやつし
hirokōji uwasa no hito ni mi wo yatsushi

on Hirokoji Street [i.e., Main Street]
 the infamous woman
 incognito

“Infamous woman” is my translation of the more literal, “gossiped-about woman” (*uwasa no onna*). In his verse Shōichi taps into the deep roots of Japanese love poetry, evoking a world of exotic courtesans who were shunned and gossiped about by “respectable” women.

A female poet writing under the name Yōko followed Shōichi's verse with this one:

リングの石をこっそりと替え
ringu no ishi wo kossori to kae

secretly changing
 the stone in the ring

The theme remains love, but the focus shifts from public gossip to the private thoughts of (I presume) a wife. Yōko follows the image of a harlot-in-disguise with that of a housewife whose behavior at a jeweler's shop is equally clandestine. And though readers are invited into this private moment to observe the switching of ring stones, we are not told the reason. Has the woman incurred a debt and now must sell the diamond, substituting it with cubic zirconium? Has their marriage soured so much that the stone of the wedding ring now, for the wife, is just a rock, easily substituted with other, cheaper rocks? Has the husband perhaps been spending too much time on Hirokoji Street with a certain notorious woman? Because Yōko, following Japanese haikai tradition, leaves so much unsaid—yet so much implied—the reader must contemplate what this scene might fully mean.

Yōko's image of secretly changing the stone of a ring has personal, psychological depth. Renku today, especially its love verses, provides an interesting vehicle of Japanese poetic culture in which women and men have equal opportunity to contribute, equal opportunity to translate the urgencies of sex and attachment into poetic statements, and equal opportunity to learn from each other. If renku is a multi-voiced reflection of the universe, the increased participation of women in contemporary times can realize the aesthetic and spiritual goals of the form better than ever. Women poets have become the leaders of important renku circles in Kyoto and Tokyo. The vital female presence and female voices around renku tables today position linked verse to challenge Japanese patriarchy. Contemporary renku is a unique testing lab of gender equality in verse.

In many renku sessions in which I have participated in Japan, this insight has been borne out. For example, in an earlier session held by the same group of poets in Susono, this one on July 27, 2017, a male poet, Kenji, contributed the following love verse at position six:

アリスの恋は薄野の中
arisu no koi wa susuki no no naka

Alice's love affair
 among the plume grasses

The verse is an iconoclastic allusion to the young and innocent Alice of Wonderland, who now, surprisingly, is depicted as having sex among tall, swaying grasses. Kenji chose to evoke a scene of physical lovemaking. A female poet, Masako, followed his image with a verse that our *sabaki*—again Shokan Tadashi Kondo—immediately accepted:

短冊に再会願う星祭
tanzaku ni saikai negau hoshi matsuri

on the poem card
 a wish to meet again
 star festival

Masako moves the *renku* from a physical image of sex in the grass to a more nuanced, introspective revelation of a lover's heart. The star festival is Tanabata: the one night of the year (Seventh Month, seventh day) in which a celestial couple, separated by Heaven's River (the Milky Way), can cross over and be together. The person (I picture a woman) who writes on the poem card expresses a hope to do with her lover what the lover-stars above do once a year: "meet again." Masako's verse, moving forward past an erotic moment, deepens its feeling and demonstrates that loving relationships can entail more than momentary passion. They can reach longingly for a future ... but will that future be attained? Due to the fast, forward-moving pace of *renku*, this question is moot. The poem rushes onward through a kaleidoscope of experiences, leaving love and hopes for a "happily ever after" ending fade from memory as it proceeds on its way to its preordained conclusion of blossoms and enlightenment.

Blossoms became associated with enlightenment for the Buddhists of Japan and elsewhere because they are fragile and impermanent. At the

very peak of their beauty they are already dying, hence serving as a living symbol for a universe to be appreciated but never clung to. As a poetic ritual designed by monks, renku continues to invite its participants to take an imaginary tour of human experience that encourages a deep realization of the transitory nature of people and things, while at the same time helping those participants to relinquish attachment to such.

Many, if not most, contemporary poets of renku in Japan and around the world are not consciously aware of its Buddhist origins or its deep, ritualistic structure. However, if they faithfully follow its rules and adopt its spirit—if they surrender ego-control to journey in their imaginations, side-by-side with fellow poets, through a world of experience, arriving ultimately at a revelation of blossoms and an ineffable sense of peace—they are having a Buddhist experience whether or not they recognize or label it as such. Human love and desire have always been, and remain, essential to renku as a ritual of detachment, because in human life, love and desire are often the strongest attachments of all.

POSTSCRIPT

Writing this essay during my coronavirus self-quarantine—during which time I have participated in several renku via Skype with friends in Japan and Bulgaria—I'm struck by how linked verse by means of Internet connection tools and social media remains an experience of human connection, togetherness, and loving compassion. I highly recommend it, pandemic or not!

NOTES

¹ Renku is the preferred term today for the linked verse form known first as *renga* and later as *haikai no renga*.

² My translation of Poem 1635 of the *Man'yōshū*, reprinted in Donald Keene, "The Comic Tradition in Renga," John W. Hall & Toyoda Takeshi, Eds., *Japan in the Muromachi Age* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977) 241-77; qtd. on p. 244. Keene favors this as the first *renga* because the two contributions make a single poem (243-44); some Japanese poets trace the origins of linked

verse all the way back to the Kojiki, in which an old man answers a verse by Yamato-takeru-no-mikoto with a verse of his own; the two verses together, however, do not read like a single poem.

³ Ebersole, Gary L. "The Buddhist Ritual Use of Linked Poetry in Medieval Japan." *The Eastern Buddhist* 16.2 (Autumn 1983): 50-71.

⁴ "Bundai hiki-oroseba soku hogu nari" (文台引き下ろせばそく反古なり). Quoted by Hiroaki Sato in *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007) 150.

⁵ Quotes from "Jump Flea" are taken from Issa zenshū (Nagano: Shinano Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1978) 5.403-4. The English translations are mine.