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Society for Asian Art

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Series*

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**Readings from the Poetry,
Women's Memoirs, and Noh
Drama of Japan**

Reader for Segment One of the
Course:

Poetry

*so peaceful!
crags doused
with cicada chorus*

Matsuo Bashō, in his hand

compiled by
John R. Wallace

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*Very Early Poems—the Nara Period, 8th c., Man'yôshû
(Collection of Ten-Thousand Leaves)*



Man'yôshû — Book I:1

by Emperor Yûryaku (r. 456–479)
(trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

This is the first poem of the collection and one of its earliest. Probably dating from the late kofun period, it was composed before the Yamato consolidation of power, and thus at a time when intra-clan fighting was common. Conquering leaders would mount high places of the lands they had subjugated to announce their newly acquired dominion. This poem is along those lines.

Poem by the Emperor

Girl with your basket,
with your pretty basket,
with your shovel,
with your pretty shovel,
gathering shoots on the hillside here,
I want to ask your home.
Tell me your name!
This land of Yamato,
seen by the gods on high—
it is all my realm,
in all of it I am supreme.
I will tell you
my home and my name.

Man'yôshû — Book II:167

by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (active 689–700)
(trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

This poem is a *chôka* (“long poem/song”) and is representative of Hitomaro’s **lyric style** as well as his “epic” vision as conveyed through his

large-scale metaphors. This poem praises the imperial family.

Poem by Kakinomoto Hitomaro at the time of the temporary enshrinement of the Crown Prince, Peer of the Sun

In the beginning
of heaven and earth,
on the riverbanks
of the far firmament,
the eight million deities,
the ten million deities
gathered in godly assembly
and held divine counsel,
and judged that the Sun Goddess,
Amaterasu,
would rule the heavens
and, that he should rule
this land below,
where ears of rice flourish
on the reed plains,
until heaven and earth
draw together again,
pushed apart the eight-fold
clouds of heaven
and sent down to us
the high-shining Prince.
he ruled as a god
at the Kiyomi Palace
in Asuka,
where the birds fly,
until he opened heaven’s gate of stone
and rose, godlike, to those fields,
dwelling of Emperors.

If our Lord, the Crown Prince,
 had lived to follow him
 and rule the realm under heaven,
 how, like the spring blossoms,
 he would have been noble,
 how, like the full moon,
 he would have waxed great.
 So the people
 of the earth's four directions
 placed their hopes on him,
 as on a great ship,
 and looked up to him in expectation
 as, in a drought,
 to the flood-swollen sky.
 But—what could have been
 in his mind?—
 he has driven thick palace pillars
 by remote Mayumi Hill
 and raised high his mausoleum hall.
 Now many days and months have passed
 since the voice of his morning
 commandments
 fell silent,
 and the Prince's courtiers
 do not know which way to turn.

***Man'yôshû* — Book II:217**

by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (active 689–700)
 (trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

Hitomaro's **lyricism** was well suited for composing poetic *banka* ("laments"). The type of open mourning we read in the poem below is more difficult to find in the following Heian period *Kokinshû* that values so highly indirect, elegant expression. The undisguised emotions in the poem below are part of the charm of the *Man'yôshû* as a collection that values *makoto* ("sincerity").

Poem by Kakinomoto Hitomaro upon the death of the maiden of Tsu in Kibi

Wife beautiful
 as the reddened autumn hills,
 girl lithe
 as soft bamboo,
 what could have been in her mind?

Life long as mulberry rope—
 only if it were dew,
 then we could say
 that, rising in the morning,
 it vanishes by evening.
 Only if it were mist,
 then we could say
 that, rising in the morning,
 it is lost by morning.
 But even I,
 who only heard of her
 like the sound
 of a catalpa bow,
 regret I saw her only faintly.
 Her husband, young
 like the spring grass,
 who was pillowed
 in her finely-clothed arms,
 who, when he slept,
 kept her beside him
 like his swords:
 is it loneliness
 that keeps him thinking of her,
 and from sleep?
 Is it regret
 that keeps him thinking of her,
 and longing?
 Girl who has gone
 before her time,
 like dew in the morning,
 like mist in the evening.

***Man'yôshû* — Book II:223**

by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (active 689–700)
 (trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

Hitomaro also wrote excellent short poems of great lyricism.

Poem written by Kakinomoto Hitomaro in his own sorrow as he was about to die in the land of Iwami

Not knowing I am pillowed
 among the crags on Kamo Mountain,
 my wife must still be waiting
 for my return.

Kakinomoto Hitomaro Collection

— *Book X:1896*

by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (active 689–700)
(trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

Hitomaro's humanity and superior literary skill can be seen in this romantic poem that uses the unique phrase 心に乗りけるかも (“she has indeed alighted on my heart”).

Like the lithe bending
of the weeping willows
when spring arrives,
so my woman has set herself upon my soul,
bending it, pliantly.

Man'yôshû — Book IV:492–493

by Toneri no Yoshitoshi, then Tanabe no Ichihiko (late 7th c.)
(trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

One of the most beautiful books of the *Man'yôshû*, in my opinion, is Book IV, a collection of “**exchanged poems**” (*sômon*). This tradition of men and women writing their love to each other begins very early in Japan with the practice of *utagaki* (“**song-fence**” or, as Cranston translates the term “**songfest**”). *Utagaki* were written during carnival-like festivals where men and women would temporarily find one another in love. **Exchanged poems** are extremely important through the Heian period, forming the backbone of poem content in such works as *The Tale of Genji* and aristocratic women's memoirs, especially *Lady Izumi's Story* (*Izumi Shikibu nikki*, trans. by Cranston as *Lady Izumi's Diary*.)

492

What do you mean to do,
leaving me behind
whose longing for you
is greater than a weeping child's,
clutching his parent's sleeves?

493

When I go away, leaving her behind,

my wife will long for me,
spreading her black hair,
over her bed—
through these long nights.

Man'yôshû — Book IV:627–628

by a young woman, then Saeki no Sukune Akamaro
(early 8th c.)
(trans. by Ian Hideo Levy)

Exchanged poems (*sômon*) are sometimes an invitation by the man to the woman, an invitation she might accept, or reject, or answer ambiguously) as is so often the case in the more circuitous diction of the later Heian period). Below is a humorous rejection. The man's initial poem is not included.

627

Poem sent by a maiden in response to one by Saeki Akamaro

Brave man who wants to make
a pillow of my sleeves,
first find yourself the waters of youth,
for white hairs have sprouted on your head.

628

Poem by Saeki Akamaro in response

I do not concern myself
with the white hairs sprouted on my head.
But somehow I shall find
the waters of youth,
then go to you.

Man'yôshû — Book IV:488

by Princess Nukata (b. ca. 638–active until 690's)
(trans. by Edwin A. Cranston)

According to Cranston, **Princess Nukata** is the first person in Japanese literary history to leave a reputation primarily as a poet.¹

A poem composed by Princess Nukata in longing for the Ômi Sovereign

¹ Cranston, *A Waka Anthology: Volume One*, 172.

While I wait for you,
My lord, lost in this longing,
Suddenly there comes
A stirring of my window blind:
The autumn wind is blowing.

***Man'yôshû* — Book III:317–318**

by Yamabe no Akahito (active 724–736)
(trans. by Edwin A. Cranston)

Yamabe no Akahito is regarded as nearly an equal to Hitomaro. Akahito is known for his iconic, **scenic imagery**. In this sense, he is considered squarely within the tradition of Japanese poets, as opposed to those *Man'yôshû* poets who looked to Chinese literature and poems for themes, metaphors, and images. His poem of **Mt. Fuji**, below, is the first great poem to be written about this mountain that would come to represent the country of Japan in so many different situations. It is considered one of his very best poems.

The *tanka* (“short poem”) that follows is a special use of the short poem called a *hanka* (“echoing poem” or “envoy”) and is included to accentuate the theme of the longer poem.

Tanka (31 syllables in a 5-7-5-7-7 format) will be the only acceptable form of poem for the 10th c. imperial anthology, the *Kokinshû*. In the *Man'yôshû* it is the more common form, but the *chôka* (“long poem”) receives careful treatment and prominent placement.

A poem on a distant view of Mount Fuji by Yamabe no Sukune Akahito, with tanka

From the division
Of the heaven and the earth,
Instinct with godhead,
Lofty and noble has there stood,
Rising in Suruga,
The towering cone of Fuji:
When I gaze afar
Across the distant plains of heaven
The wandering sun
With all its beams is blotted out,
The shining moon
And all its light is lost to view;

The white clouds fear
To drift across the mountain face,
And in all seasons
Snow still falls upon the peak:
I shall tell the tale,
I shall talk for all my days
About Fuji's towering cone.

Envoy

When from Tago shore
We rowed far out and turned to look,
Pure white it was,
The towering cone of Fuji
Gleaming under fallen snow!

***Man'yôshû* — Book III:338, 341, 346, 350**

by Ôtomo no Tabito (665–731)
(trans. by Edwin A. Cranston)

Ôtomo no Tabito wrote poems at about the same time as the lyricist Hitomaro. However, he was more active after the establishment of the Nara period with its heavy importation of things and concepts from China. He is one of the most **Sinicized** of Man'yô poets. (During the pre-World War II nationalist period of Japan, the *Man'yôshû* was elevated above the more effete, elegant, and aristocratic *Kokinshû* as representing the true soul of Japan, with its manly sincerity and directness. However, in truth the Manyô poets are often well-versed in Chinese literature, respected it highly, and were variously influenced by it.) Below are some of the poems Tabito wrote in praise of wine, a drink loved by the poets of China whom he studied.

Thirteen poems in praise of sake by Lord Ôtomo, Governor-General of Dazaifu

338

Things of no value—
Better not waste your thoughts on them;
But to take a cup
Brimming with the cloudy wine . . .
Yes, and drain it to the lees!

339

He named it Sage—
 This was the name he gave to wine,
 That ancient wise man,
 That great sage of long ago—
 And how fine the word he chose!

341

Better than prating
 with false display of wisdom,
 Or so I've been told,
 Is to take wine, and to drink,
 And to weep with drunken tears.

346

Gems that shine at night—
 Talk of such things all you want,
 Could they be as rare
 As the joy of drinking wine
 And letting your heart fly free?

350

Not your sullen pride,
 Nor your air of wise disdain
 Will ever equal
 Solace found in drinking wine
 And weeping drunken tears.

***Man'yôshû* — Book V:904**

by Yamanoue no Okura (660–ca. 733)
 (trans. by Edwin A. Cranston)

Yamanoue no Okura is part of the valued character of the *Man'yôshû* as an anthology—unlike the later *Kokinshû*—that incorporates a wide range of poetic voices on a wide range of topics. Okura traveled to **T'ang China**, a life-changing event for him. Unlike Hitomaro who revered the great mysteries of life and whose poems in their most sublime seem almost mystical, Okura gravitates towards the worldly. He is at times a **social critic** and, in his darker moments, critical if not cynical about the world as it is. (See, for example, his poem, “A Dialogue on Poverty”, not included in here.) The below poem, however, a *banka* (“lament”) for

his deceased son, shows that the depth of his humanity is no less than that of Hitomaro's. Not quoted below are the two *tanka* that follow this *chôka* (“long poem”).

*Three poems of yearning for his son named Furuhi:
 one chôka, two tanka*

As for the treasures,
 The precious things of seven kinds,
 Reverenced and craved
 By all the people of the world,
 What are they to me?
 Our treasure was
 Our son Furuhi, the white lustrous pearl
 Born of our love,
 Who on mornings when at dawn
 The bright star hung
 Upon the brightening sky,
 Would stay with us
 Beneath the covers of our bed,
 And whether we stood
 Or sat to rest
 Frolicked with us all the day.
 Then when evening
 And the evening star drew on,
 “Come on, go to bed,”
 He urged us, pulling us by the hand.
 “Father and Mother,
 Don't go away from me,
 I'll sleep between,
 We'll be stalks of splitty-grass.”
 Sweet were his ways
 As he chattered on to us.
 For the day to come
 When he would grow into a man
 And we might see
 Full-formed his character for good or ill
 We waited, confident
 As they who trust to a great ship.
 Then suddenly
 An ill wind blew athwart our lives,
 A baneful blast
 Overtook us, unprepared.
 What could I do?
 Not knowing where to reach for help,

I bound my sleeves,
 My white barken sleeves with cords,
 And in my hands
 Grasping our round cloudless mirror,
 To the gods of heaven
 I raised my voice in beseeching prayer,
 And to the gods of earth
 I bowed and pressed my brow into the dust.
 “To save him from this fate,
 Or let him die—
 It lies within the pleasure of the gods.”
 With distracted steps
 I wandered in beseeching prayer,
 But all in vain—
 Not for a moment did his body mend,
 While inexorably
 A cruel devastation ravaged his sweet face.
 Morning by morning
 His utterances grew faint and few;
 At last, his soul flown free,
 Life ebbed, dwindled, and was gone.
 I leaped into the air
 And stamped upon the ground. I cried
 aloud.
 I beat my breast now wracked with sobs.
 The child I held in my arms,
 I have let him go like a bird in flight.
 This too is the way of the world.

Man'yôshû — *Book VI:994, Book XIX:4139,*
Book XX:4468–4469

by Ôtomo no Yakamochi (718?–785)
 (trans. by Edwin A. Cranston)

Ôtomo no Yakamochi, Tabito's son, is generally regarded as the **compiler**, or one of the compilers, of the *Man'yôshû*. Ten percent of the poems in the collection are his. Yakamochi was prolific and wrote during many stages of his life. His poems reflect this variety. Below are two poems from his early years, and are essentially amorous in nature. Following those are two poems from his later years, poems heavy with melancholy.

A poem by Ôtomo no Sukune Yakamochi on the new moon

994

When I gaze aloft,
 See there the crescent moon,
 I am reminded
 Of the eyebrows of a person
 Whom once I briefly glimpsed.

4139

Two poems composed on gazing at the blossoms of the peach and damson trees in my spring garden, on the evening of the first of the third month of Tempyô-Shôhō [750]

My whole spring arbor
 Radiates a crimson glow:
 Blossoms of the peach
 Shine down on the garden path
 Where a maiden steps in view.

4468–4469

Two poems composed when lying ill, in sadness over impermanence, desiring to practice the Way

Man counts for nothing,
 A body empty, ephemeral—
 Let me gaze on beauty
 In clear mountains and rivers
 While I search for the Way.

Vying with the light
 Of the heaven-coursing sun,
 Oh, let me search,
 That I find it once again—
 The Way that was so pure.



High Classical Poetry of the Heian Period—the 10th c. Kokinshū
(Collection of Poems Ancient and Contemporary)



Kokinshū — Book I (First Book of Spring):1–2

by Ariwara Motokata (9th c.), then Ki no Tsurayuki (ca. 872–945)

(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

The *Kokinshū*, as a collection, works on a number of levels, not least of which is the **ordering of its poems**. Early spring poems are placed early in the books on Spring, for example, and the five books of love roughly mark off the arc of a typical love affair from beginning to end. Besides this sequential type of ordering rule, “dull” poems are placed near more remarkable poems to help set them off. This is the case of the first two poems of the collection, below. It is the second poem that is truly famous. One might say that the first—while exceptionally appropriate as a poem of the beginning of spring, so early that winter is still lingering—is, as a poem, more conceptual than poetic. If one takes the first poem as a “warm up” then **Ki no Tsurayuki**, the anthology’s compiler, has put his own poem in the strongest, most prominent position.

1

Composed on a day when spring arrived during the old year

Springtime has arrived
while the old year lingers on.
What then of the year?
Are we to talk of “last year”?
Or are we to say “this year”?

2

Composed on the first day of spring

On this first spring day

might warm breezes be melting
the frozen waters
I scooped up, cupping my hands
and letting my sleeves soak through?

*This poem is skillfully stretched over three seasons: the summer, when the poet scooped up the cool stream water on a hot day, the winter, when that same stream was frozen, and the current spring. It also counterpoints two verbs: to bind (*musubu*, translated above as “cupping”) and to unbind [*toku*, translated above as “melting”].

❖ 12 ❖

Kokinshū — Book I (First Book of Spring):5

by Anonymous

(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Many of the poems of the *Kokinshū* are listed as “anonymous.” Sometimes this is indeed true while sometimes it was considered appropriate, for various reasons, not to list the name. These reasons included uncertainty about whether the poem was truly by a certain individual or not, political constraints (since it was imperially commanded and not all are friends of the imperial family or the anthology’s compilers for that matter), and discretion (in the case of love poems).

The below poem is a good example of the *Kokin* poet’s love for **poetic conceit**. Here the poem revolves around the poetic confusion of the similarity between white snowflakes and falling white plum blossoms. Again, notice how, as an early spring poem, winter has a presence.

5

Topic unknown

O warbler perching
on a bough of the plum tree,

you come with your song
to welcome in the springtime,
yet snowflakes still flutter down.

* The kinetic, busy nature of the warbler (*uguisu*) is well represented by the falling snowflakes, which may well be the plum blossom petals it has caused to fall when it hurriedly alighted on a tree branch.

***Kokinshû* — Book I (First Book of Spring):40**

by Mitsune
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Another plum blossom poem. The two most common characteristics of the plum that appear in *Kokin* poems are its whiteness and fragrance.

40

When someone said, "Break off some plum blossoms for me" on a moonlit night, he composed this as he did so.

Blossoms of the plum
merging with the radiance
of a moonlit night:
if we would make sure of them,
we must seek out their fragrance.

* This poem builds on contrasts of black and white and visual imagery that is then negated by the blindness of darkness; there is also a counterpoint between the two senses of sight and smell.

***Kokinshû* — Book I (First Book of Spring):53, 56, 59**

by Ariwara Narihira no Ason (825–880), then Monk Sosei, then Ki no Tsurayuki
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Cherry blossoms, *sakura*. They are now so well established as the representative flower of Japan. The connection was developed within the context of the compiling and editing of the *Kokinshû*. During the Heian period there was a turning away from things Chinese and an intense **exploration and articulation of indigenous values**. Thus the plum tree, associated with China, was downplayed in the

Kokinshû. (It enjoyed much greater prominence in the *Man'yôshû* where it outnumbered and bested the cherry blossom poems.) The *Kokinshû* so thoroughly put cherry blossoms forward as the most poetic of flowers that within a generation when the generic word "flower" (*hana*) appeared in a poem, it should be taken to mean the cherry blossom unless specifically marked somehow as not the case.

In the first of the three poems below Narihira's early composition is spotted by the compiler Tsurayuki as perfect for the ethos he wants the cherry blossom to evoke: **fleeting beauty** that is both compelling, sad and at times even disturbing.

Ariwara Narihira is the protagonist of the collection of romantic poem-tales that is titled, ***Tales of Ise***. The passionate Narihira is a precursor to the amorous debonair Shining Genji of *The Tale of Genji*.

53

On seeing cherry blossoms at the Nagisa-no-In

If ours were a world
where blossoming cherry trees
were not to be found,
what tranquility would bless
the human heart in springtime!

56

On looking out at the capital when the cherry trees were in full bloom

Seen from a distance
willows and cherry blossoms
all intermingled:
the imperial city
in truth a springtime brocade.

* The complex intermingling of rich colors and patterns that is typical of Heian period brocaded silk is an excellent example of the love for color that this period embraced. In this poem the key colors are the new greens of the willow trees, the pale pinks and whites of the cherry trees and the sparkling silver and slate colors of the tiled roofs in the sunlight, with accents of golden brown from the roads.

59

Composed by command

The cherry blossoms
must be at their glorious best,
for in the valleys
lying between the mountains
white clouds have come into view.

* Again, this poem is based in part on the poetic confusion between small, low drifting clouds and the cloudlike shape of mountain cherry trees in full bloom.

Kokinshū — *Book II (Second Book of Spring):71, 89*

by Anonymous, then two by Ki no Tsurayuki
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

The first twenty poems or so of the second book of spring are devoted to aspects of **cherry blossoms** that have scattered. The most famous of the poems below is 89.

71

Topic unknown

It is just because
they scatter without a trace
that cherry blossoms
delight us so, for in this world
lingering means ugliness.

89

A poem from the Teijiin Contest

In the lingering wake
of the breeze that has scattered
the cherry tree's bloom,
petal wavelets go dancing
across the waterless sky.

Kokinshū — *Book I (Second Book of Spring):126, 132*

by Monk Sosei, then Mitsune
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

The two poems below are good examples of the Heian **love for nature**, especially the upwelling of beauty and life that is so easily visible during spring. The first poem exemplifies a Heian propensity for play, often in the form of concert or pageantry but here in a simpler mode. The second of the poems is located very close to the end of the books of spring.

126

Composed as a spring poem

How I would delight
in setting off together
with intimate friends
to the spring hills, and sleeping
wherever it might suit us.

132

Composed on the last day of the Third Month, when he saw some ladies returning from gathering flowers

They are not such things
as a man's hand can detain—
and yet absurdly
my heart goes running after
every scattering blossom.

* Because classical Japanese is referenced to a lunar calendar, the "last day of the Third Month" about is roughly equivalent to our mid-May.

Kokinshū — *Book IV (First Book of Autumn):169*

by Fujiwara Toshiyuki no Ason
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Summer and winter are given much lighter treatment in the *Kokinshū* than are spring and autumn.

Like the first of the spring poems, the first autumn poem occupies a seasonal moment of transition from summer to autumn.

169

Composed on the first day of autumn

Nothing meets the eye
to demonstrate beyond doubt
that autumn has come—
yet suddenly we are struck
just by the sound of the wind.

* The poet is suggesting the early autumn winds have a specific sound, perhaps the dryness of early autumn grasses or the first scattering of leaves.

Kokinshū — *Book IV (First Book of Autumn):191, 199, 215, Book V (Second Book of Autumn): 279*

by Anonymous
(trans. by John R. Wallace, then three by Helen Craig McCullough)

The autumn is a season rich in phenomena that appealed to the sensibilities of Heian poets. Below are a few of them.

191

Topic unknown

Against the glowing clouds
we see each and every departing goose,
their wings crossing and uncrossing—
moon of an autumn's night.

* This poem includes a number of Heian period autumn icons: migrating geese, usually described in flight at night (and one should imagine hearing their multitudinous calls as they fly), the white, crisp and very bright orb of the full moon against a very black sky, and the clarity of the air.

199

It seems that dewdrops
must be colder than all else
on an autumn night,
for insect voices complain
in every cluster of grass.

* Poetic sensibility in the Heian period was often displayed as deductive reasoning based on thoughtful consideration of natural events or conditions.

215

The gloom of autumn
strikes sharpest into our hearts
when we hear a stag
calling as he presses through
colored leaves deep in the hills.

* A stag's call, a very sharp sound, was thought to be one of loneliness as he searched for his mate.

279

Composed when His Majesty [Emperor Uda] commanded him to provide a poem to accompany a floral offering at the Ninnaji

For chrysanthemums
there is a season of splendor
other than autumn:
they but increase in beauty
after their color changes.

* In typical Heian fashion, the poet has noticed the finer points of seasonal change.

Kokinshū — *Book V (Second Book of Autumn):290, 304, 319*

by Anonymous, then Mitsune, then Okikaze
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

As one might guess, a large number of autumn poems are devoted to the **color of leaves**, falling leaves, and the winds that cause them to fall. The actual turning of the leaves color is another common theme, but it appears more often in the books of love rather than the seasonal books, as a metaphor for infidelity and unreliability. ("Leaf" in poetry, *ha*, is also used to mean "word" as in promises or the words and poems of a love letter that declares affection.)

290

That the blowing wind

seems to us to be colored
in a thousand hues,
is simply because the leaves
are scattering from autumn trees.

304

On autumn leaves scattering near a pond

So clear the water
where the wind comes to send down
colored foliage—
even unscattered leaves float,
reflected on the bottom.

* One should imagine on the water's surface the floating of newly fallen leaves while *reflected* on the water's surface (looking as if behind the real leaves, thus "on the bottom") are the images of the leaves above that are still on the trees. This layered image is in motion, as the breeze sometimes stirs the leaves around and is sometime still, allowing for reflection. It is also multicolored since the leaves are not only of different colors but some are upside down showing a different set of colors and all are in the context of whatever colors are actually on the bottom of the pond. The purity of the water conveys well the coolness of the season.

310

Watching the colors
in the river descending
from deep in the hills,
we feel the knowledge strike home:
this is autumn's final hour.

* This is another "**deductive reasoning**" poem; we are to conclude that most trees in the cooler upper hills (invisible from where we stand) are already bare since the stream arriving from there is so full of fallen leaves.

Kokinshū — *Book XI (First Book of Love)*

A large portion of the *Kokinshū* is devoted to poems about love. These are collected into **five books** that outline the course of a typical love affair:

- the onset of romantic infatuation,

- the frustration of limited meetings or one-sided love,
- managing trysts and keeping the affair secret from gossipers,
- romantic difficulties and the early moments of recognizing that an affair might be over, and, finally,
- futile waiting.

It is a view of love confident in its belief that **love cannot last**. But unlike the cherry blossoms that are honored for the brevity of their beauty, one senses that the fleeting nature of passion as described in these poems is simply the fact of it, not especially seen as either beautiful or darkly negative. The psychological pain of becoming romantically involved is highlighted, including pressure from society that interdicts the affair. It is difficult to find selfless love among these poems; they are inevitably about **one's own feelings**. Often these poems were originally either a part of a letter to a lover stating one's amorous interest or, more often, one's anxious concern or bitter complaint. Sometimes they are simply a statement of one's anguished frame of mind. While the *Kokinshū* preface famously asserts that poems "**bring harmony to the relations between men and women**" it also says that poems arise out of powerful feelings: "It comes into being when men use the seen and the heard to **give voice to feelings aroused by the innumerable events in their lives.**" It is this latter aspect of poetry that seems more apparent in the books of love.

Kokinshū — *Book XI (First Book of Love):470, 476, 481*

by Monk Sosei, then Ariwara Narihira, then Ōshikōchi Mitsune
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

The **First Book of Love**, one of the longer ones, describes the feelings of the poet who is suddenly overcome with a passionate interest in another. These poems are **mostly written by men**. While "love at first sight" is a phrase we are familiar with, in these poems love may also be born from hearing the other's voice, or simply hearing *about* the other from a third party.

470

Though I but know you
through others, love has made me
like chrysanthemum dew,

rising by night and by day
fading into nothingness.

* “Dew” (*tsuyu*) is a favorite word of Heian period love poems. It means both “dew” and “just barely” and the verb used to describe its evaporation (*kenu*) is also used to describe death. It symbolizes uncertainty, brevity, and helplessness.

476

On the day of an archery meet at the riding grounds of the Bodyguards of the Right, Narihira glimpsed a lady's face through the silk curtains of a carriage opposite. He sent her this poem.

How very foolish!
Shall I spend all of today
lost in pensive thought,
my heart bewitched by someone
neither seen nor yet unseen?

481

Since hearing your voice
faintly as we hear the cries
of the first wild geese,
I gaze into space, my mind
filled with idle fantasies.

* The phrase “the first wild geese” locates this as a spring poem for the geese are returning from their wintering grounds. It is a metaphor appropriate for the onset of something. Migrating geese as they flock to land are a very noisy bunch. The confusion of love and the cacophony of these birds matches well.

Kokinshū — *Book XI (First Book of Love):471*

by Ki no Tsurayuki, then Anonymous
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

In all cases, the poet's amorous interest is nearly immediate. Love does not develop by graduated degree; it **swiftly disorients** the one overtaken with it.

471

Swift indeed has been

the birth of my love for you—
swift as the current
where waves break high over rocks
in the Yoshino River.

* Due to their constancy and strength, waves often represent insistent male ardor in Heian love poems.

Kokinshū — *Book XI (First Book of Love): 522*

by Anonymous
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Most of the First Book of Love describes the painful state of **unrequited love**, either because the object of one's affection is inaccessible (she might be an imperial consort, or married) or is simply disinterested.

522

Less profitable
than writing on the waters
of a flowing stream—
such is the futility
of unrequited passion.

Kokinshū — *Book XII (Second Book of Love): 553*

by Ono no Komachi
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

The **Second Book of Love** progresses from the first in several ways. In particular, there has been **some contact** with the one who has captured the poet's romantic ardor. This contact, however, is ephemeral and occurs mostly in the form of **dream-meetings**. Due to this increased closeness, even if only imagined, the level of passion is heightened as is the suffering and frustration that accompanies it. Most of this book is about the disturbing power of **one-sided infatuation** and laments over the inability to meet, for whatever the reason. Love is expressed not as a positive declaration to the beloved but in the introverted language of one's pain for not being able to share one's devotion with that other. Love, furthermore, is seen as a movement of the heart that is quite natural; that is, there is no rational inner dialogue that doubts the emotion or attempts to reign it in. There is, in other words, no couching of the

problems of love in a “free will” context with one struggling to gain the upper hand over one’s feelings that are bringing nothing but grief.

Ki no Tsurayuki selects three poems by **Ono no Komachi** as the opening sequence for the Second Book of Love. Below is one of those. Ono no Komachi is seen as the female counterpart to her contemporary Ariwara Narihira, the great lover of the 9th c., protagonist of *The Tales of Ise*, and precursor to the preeminent lover of the Heian period, the fictional Genji of *The Tale of Genji*. Komachi is no less passionate than Narihira; indeed, **her poems have few rivals for the intensity of feeling expressed in them.** (However, being a woman, where Narihira has continued to be seen as a dashing gentleman with a charming soft spot for women, Komachi has been treated over the centuries less kindly, as a woman consumed by her desire. In many depictions of her, her ardor leads to insanity.)

553

Since encountering
my beloved as I dozed,
I have come to feel
that it is dreams, not real life,
on which I can pin my hopes.

Kokinshū — Book XII (Second Book of Love):562, 563, 569, 572, 600

by Ki no Tomonori (the first two poems), then Fujiwara Okikaze, then Ki no Tsurayuki, then Mitsune
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Most of the First Book of Love describes the painful state of **unrequited love**, either because the object of one’s affection is inaccessible (she might be an imperial consort, or married) or is simply disinterested.

562

When evening draws in,
my love outburns the fireflies,
and yet you scorn me.
Might your indifference vanish
if you were to see the flame?

563

Colder than the frost
coming to settle on leaves
of grassy bamboo—
even thus are my sleeves chilled
when I must lie down alone.

* This poem, together with the one preceding it, form an excellent example of artistic **sequencing of poems** within the anthology. While both poems are by the same person on the same topic, one uses fire as its base image with the other uses ice. Heian aesthetics has a deep fascination with **contrasts**.

569

Goaded by misery,
I resolved to forget you
at whatever cost,
but now I find that a dream
has revived all my old hopes.

572

Did I not pour forth
these tears of longing for you,
the breast of my robe
would take on the red color
of the flame that consumes me.

600

Why did I regard
summer insects as foolish?
Did not I myself
perish voluntarily
in the fire of this passion?

* A common image in this period’s love poetry was the moth that perishes as it flies into an open flame. [Probably a common event since lighting in the Heian period was torchlight and, for poets writing at night, tableside lamplight.]

Kokinshū — Book XIV (Third Book of Love):616, 645, 646

by Ariwara Narihira, then an exchange by the Ise Virgin
replied to by her lover Narihira

(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

The poems of **Third Book of Love** are all written **after a love has been consummated**. Typical of the **indirect locution** of Heian period literature, the joy of being together and anything else about being together for that matter is almost entirely omitted. We know two lovers have been together only because of such phrases as “a morning like no other” or “Had we never met ...”.

Time spent together is very frequently described as a **dream** or dreamlike, as an event that can hardly be grasped by the memory. Thus whether it is the fantasy fulfillment of Book Two where one meets a lover in a dream that one has not actually yet met in reality or the “rubbing away” of the reality of meeting in Book Three, both take dreams as the default context for romance.

616

Composed during a drizzle and sent to a lady whom he had been secretly wooing since early in the Third Month

Having passed the night
neither waking nor sleeping,
I have spent the day
brooding and watching the rain—
the unending rain of spring.

* The poem includes one of the more common puns, or *kakekotoba* (“pivot-word”, a word that can mean more than one thing): “watching/staring blankly in thought” (*nagame*) and “long rain” (*naga-ame*).

645

When Narihira no Ason went to Ise Province, he met in great secrecy with the lady who was serving as Ise Virgin. The next morning, while he was wondering how to manage without a messenger, he received this poem from the Virgin.

Might you have come here,
or did I perhaps go there?
I cannot recall . . .
Was it dream or reality?
Was I sleeping or waking?

646

Reply

I wandered confused
in the darkness of a mind
bereft of reason.
Someone else must pronounce it
either dream or reality.

* These two poems form a set of **exchanged poems** of the type we have already encountered in the *Man'yōshū*.

***Kokinshū* — Book XIV (Third Book of Love):623, 624, 626**

by Ono no Komachi, then Minamoto Muneyuki, then Ariwara Motokata
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Book Three also takes up the vexing issues that surround the attempt to meet someone, or trying to refuse a persistent someone, or the sting of being the one who is refused. The first of these three is written by a woman. The first and second have been paired by the anthology compiler, almost humorously, as exchanged poems though empirically speaking this is not true.

623

There is no seaweed
to be gathered in this bay.
Does he not know it—
the fisher who comes and comes
until his legs grow weary?

* There is a pun on “seaweed” (*mirume*, “seaweed,” can be read as *miru me*, “the opportunity to meet”—thus “see-weed” almost works as a translation). The “bay” of course represents the woman.

624

If this night goes by
with no meeting between us,
shall I, for a time

lengthy as a day in spring,
think you completely heartless?

626

As a breaking wave
must glimpse the shore and return,
so must I go back
frustrated and embittered
without having met my love.

***Kokinshū* — Book XIII (Third Book of**

***Love*):630, 642, 667, 670**

by Motokata, then Anonymous, then Tomonori, then
Taira Sadafun
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

By far the majority of Book Three poems deal with the prying eye of society and concern over **gossip**. To fail to keep an affair secret is not only clumsy loving from the Heian point of view, it will bring real damage to the individuals involved, especially the woman. But these poets see the contradiction in their plight. Why must they hide a love that seems right? Further, a secret affair not registered publicly is more easily voided; thus there is a certain inherent instability invited into the equation from the very act of trying to preserve it by keeping it secret.

630

However *you* feel,
I am very much distressed
by groundless gossip:
I shall deny knowing you
either now or in the past.

642

Fearing for your name
were I to linger with you
until dawn approached,
I left in the deep of night—
yet did someone perhaps see?

667

How grievous it is
to conceal one's affection!
No longer cautious,
I shall love with abandon.
Do not blame me, you others.

670

Only my pillow
knew of a passion hidden
from those around me,
but the tears I could not stop
have let the secret escape.

***Kokinshū* — Book XIII (Third Book of**

***Love*):634, 635, 637**

by Anonymous, then Ono no Komachi, then
Anonymous
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Near the middle of Book Three, there are some poems that take bedchambers as the scene. All describe the ending of the night.

634

Long, long have I loved,
and at long last on this night
our meeting takes place.
Would that the white cockerel
might be content not to crow!

635

Autumn nights, it seems,
are long by repute alone:
scarcely had we met
when morning's first light appeared,
leaving everything unsaid.

637

When brightly, brightly,
the first light of a new day
appears in the sky,
with what feelings of sadness
we don our separate robes!

Kokinshū — *Book XIV (Fourth Book of Love):688, 701*

by Anonymous
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Book Four consigns its first three-quarters to various **romantic difficulties**—the pain of amorous longing, anxiety of the direction of the affair, longs hours of waiting for one's lover and so on. The final one-quarter takes a more depressing turn, with the poet gradually recognizing that his or her partner has **broken off the affair** for one reason or another.

A few poems in this book assert the reliability of one's love. These poems, however, make up a small part of the whole.

688

The words "I love you,"
issuing from lips as leaves
sprout from trees and shrubs,
alone will keep their color,
unaltered as autumns pass.

701

Not even thunder,
the god whose stride roars and booms
all through the heavens,
might contrive to force apart
two who love one another.

Kokinshū — *Book XIV (Fourth Book of Love):685, 705, 715, 717, 726*

by Fukayabu, then Ariwara Narihira, then Tomonori,
then two by anonymous poets
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Most poems from the Fourth Book express **anxiety** in one way or another.

685

Ah, the heart of man—
it defies comprehension.
What reason is there
to suffer these lonely pangs

while we two are together?

705

Once when Fujiwara Toshiyuki was visiting a lady who lived in Narihira's house, he sent her a letter saying that he was planning to call shortly unless it began to rain too hard. Narihira wrote this on the lady's behalf.

Since I cannot ask,
point by point, whether your love
is love or no love,
the rain that knows of my plight
falls ever harder, harder.

715

How it saddens me
to hear the cicada's voice
heralding a time
when your affection for me
will seem thin as summer robes.

717

It is surely best
for lovers to say farewell
while desire still burns,
for then, at least, they preserve
memories of past happiness.

726

No doubt your feelings
are changing in countless ways,
but how shall I tell?
We cannot see human hearts
as we see autumnal leaves.

Kokinshū — *Book XIV (Fourth Book of Love):692, 736, 737, 746*

by anonymous, then Fujiwara Yoruka no Ason with
reply by Minamoto Yoshiari, then anonymous for the
final poem
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Waiting, such an icon of the amorous state of mind in the Heian period, especially for the woman, begins to make its appearance in Book Four. (Book Five will be almost entirely in the context of waiting.) Roland Barthes once wrote, “How can I tell I am in love? Because I am waiting.” This seems to be similar to the romantic language of Heian lovers, too. In Book Four early poems about waiting emphasize how hard it is to do so. By the end of the book, however, waiting is a recognition that probably the affair is over. Number 746 below is the last poem of Book Four.

692

Were I to send word,
“The moon is fine, and the night
is also pleasant,”
it would be like saying, “Come.”
It is not that I do not wait.

736

Composed and sent when she returned a packet of letters to the Minister of the Right [Minamoto Yoshiari], who had ceased to live at her house

I have resolved now
to send back the messages
that made me trust you.
There seems no more place for them
than for my aging person.

737

Reply

Though they are my own,
I will gather and keep them
in memory of you—
those leaves of words you return
to show you are done with me.

746

This very keepsake
is now a source of misery,
for were it not here

there might be fleeting moments
when I would not think of you.

Kokinshū — Book XV (Fifth Book of Love):774, 775

by Anonymous
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Nearly all **Book Five** poems seem to be have written by someone who is **waiting** for a lover that likely will never come again or definitely will never come again. Some poems explicitly describe this waiting, as is the case of the two below, but most describe the emotions and thoughts of the one waiting. In a type of symmetry with the First Book of Love, where poets were mostly men, here the women poets, even if not the actual majority, assert themselves.

774

Have I not yet ceased
this foolish trick of thinking,
“He will not come now,”
and then falling back at once
into forgetful waiting?

775

On a moonlit night
I find myself awaiting
one who will not come.
If there were but clouds and rain,
I could go sadly to bed.

* Heian lovers traveled by moonlight. City streets were not that well lit.

Kokinshū — Book XV (Fifth Book of Love):756, 760, 804

by Ise, then anonymous, then Ki no Tsurayuki
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

As we have seen in the *Man'yōshū*, **laments** already have a well-established tradition in Japanese poetry. As can be expected, in this fifth book, laments over losing love are a common topic. The first poem below is by **Ise**, another outstanding women poet of the era. Where Ono no Komachi draws on the strength

of her emotions, Ise views things in small scale and with delicacy.

756

How fitting it seems
that tears should dampen the face
even of the moon,
whose image visits my sleeve
as I sit lost in sad thought.

760

Denied a meeting,
my passion but increases.
What a fool I was
to fall so deeply in love
with the shallowest of streams!

804

As autumn's sadness
makes the first wild geese cry out
winging through the sky,
so the autumn of your love
sends me weeping through the day.

***Kokinshū* — Book XV (Fifth Book of Love):782, 790, 797, 817**

by Ono no Komachi, then Komachi's sister, then again
Komachi, then anonymous
(trans. by Helen Craig McCullough)

Recognizing the end or, as in the last poem
below, doing all one can to prevent it.

782

Even your pledges,
leaves of words, have lost their green
now that falling tears
dim my youth as drizzling rains
transform autumnal foliage.

790

*Sent attached to a leaf from a burned clump of grass
when her lover was showing signs of drifting away*

As now the fires burn,
unceasing, in fields of reeds
withered by time's flight,
so smolders the grief of one
aging and soon to be left.

797

So much I have learned:
the blossom that fades away,
its color unseen,
is the flower in the heart
of one who lives in this world.

817

I will not lose hope
until I have probed your heart
over and over
as men over and over
rough-plow a new-claimed paddy.