

have become bored with her household, pronouncing it lacking in sparkle.

And yet such reticence is not taken to extremes by all; some women can let themselves go and come out with quite risqué verses. But, although Her Majesty wants the stiff and formal ones to be more lively, and indeed tells them so, their habits are too ingrained. What is more, the young nobles these days are too compliant and act very seriously as long as they are with us. But when they are somewhere like the High Priestess's household they naturally seek to compose all sorts of elegant phrases in praise of the moon or the blossoms, and they say what they think. Here in the Palace, where people traipse in and out day and night and there is little mystery, women who can make the most ordinary conversation sound intriguing or who can compose a passable reply to an interesting poem have become very scarce indeed, or so the men seem to be saying. I have never heard them say this in so many words, however, so I do not know the truth of the matter.

It is ridiculous to respond to someone's overtures with something that causes offence because it has simply been tossed off without due thought. One should take care to give an appropriate response. This is what is meant by the saying 'sensitivity is a precious gift'. Why should self-satisfied smugness be seen as a sign of wisdom? And there again, why should one continually interfere with other people's lives? To be able to adapt to a situation to the correct degree and then to act accordingly seems to be extremely difficult for most people.

For example, whenever the Master of Her Majesty's Household arrives with a message for Her Majesty, the senior women are so helpless and childish that they hardly ever come out to greet him; and when they do, what happens? They seem unable to say anything in the least bit appropriate. It is not that they are at a loss for words, and it is not that they are lacking in intelligence; it is just that they feel so self-conscious and embarrassed that they are afraid of saying something silly, so they refuse to say anything at all and try to make themselves as invisible as possible. Women in other households cannot possibly act in such a manner! Once one has entered this kind of service, even the highest born of ladies learns how to adapt; but our women still act as

though they were little girls who had never left home. And as the Master of the Household has made it plain that he objects to being greeted by a woman of a lower rank, there are times when he leaves without seeing anyone; either because the right woman has gone home or because those women who are in their rooms refuse to come out. Other nobles, the kind who often visit Her Majesty with messages, seem to have secret understandings with particular women of their choice and when that woman is absent they simply retire in disappointment. It is hardly surprising that they take every opportunity to complain the place is moribund.

It must be because of all this that the women in the High Priestess's household look down on us. But even so, it makes little sense to ridicule everyone else and claim: 'We are the only ones of note. Everyone else is as good as blind and deaf when it comes to matters of taste.' It is very easy to criticize others but far more difficult to put one's own principles into practice, and it is when one forgets this truth, lauds oneself to the skies, treats everyone else as worthless and generally despises others that one's own character is clearly revealed.

It was a letter I would have loved you to have seen for yourself, but the woman who secretly stole it from its hiding place to show me took it back, I remember – such a pity!

Now someone who did carry on a fascinating correspondence was Izumi Shikibu.⁷⁰ She does have a rather unsavoury side to her character but has a talent for tossing off letters with ease and seems to make the most banal statement sound special. Her poems are most interesting. Although her knowledge of the canon and her judgements of other people's poetry leaves something to be desired, she can produce poems at will and always manages to include some clever phrase that catches the attention. Yet when it comes to criticizing or judging the work of others, well, she never really comes up to scratch – the sort of

⁷⁰ Murasaki may have been led on to the subject of Izumi Shikibu because she was Lady Chūjō's aunt, but the main link here is the subject of interesting letters and their authors. Izumi Shikibu entered the service of Shōshi in the late spring of Kankō 6 (1009) and so must have been a companion of Murasaki's for some time, although this passage is written in retrospect.

person who relies on a talent for extemporization, one feels. I cannot think of her as a poet of the highest rank.

The wife of the Governor of Tanba is known to everyone in the service of Her Majesty and His Excellency as Masahira Emon.⁷¹ She may not be a genius but she has great poise and does not feel that she has to compose a poem on everything she sees, merely because she is a poet. From what I have seen, her work is most accomplished, even her occasional verse. People who think so much of themselves that they will, at the drop of a hat, compose lame verses that only just hang together, or produce the most pretentious compositions imaginable, are quite odious and rather pathetic.

Sei Shōnagon, for instance, was dreadfully conceited.⁷² She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them?

Thus do I criticize others from various angles – but here is one who has survived this far without having achieved anything of note. I have nothing in particular to look forward to in the future that might afford me the slightest consolation, but I am not the kind of person to abandon herself completely to despair. And yet, by the same token, I cannot entirely rid myself of such feelings. On autumn evenings,

71 Otherwise known as Akazome Emon, this is the wife of Ōe no Masahira, who became Governor of Tanba in Kankō 7 (1010), 3.30. She had served with Michinaga's wife Rinshi even before her marriage and was the mother of Takachika, who, it will be remembered, read out the passage from the classics at Prince Atsuhira's first bath. She is also reputed to be the author of the *Eiga monogatari*.

72 Sei Shōnagon is the well-known author of the *Pillow Book*, who served Empress Teishi until her mistress died in childbirth in 1000. If she were still alive at this time, and there is no way of telling, she would have been about forty-five.

which positively encourage nostalgia, when I go out to sit on the veranda and gaze, I seem to be always conjuring up visions of the past – 'and did they praise the beauty of this moon of yore?' Knowing full well that I am inviting the kind of misfortune one should avoid, I become uneasy and move inside a little, while still, of course, continuing to recall the past.⁷³

And when I play my *koto* rather badly to myself in the cool breeze of the evening, I worry lest someone might hear me and recognize how I am just 'adding to the sadness of it all';⁷⁴ how vain and sad of me. So now both my instruments, the one with thirteen strings and the one with six, stand in a miserable, sooty little closet still ready-strung. Through neglect – I forgot, for example, to ask that the bridges be removed on rainy days – they have accumulated dust and lean against a cupboard. Two *biwa* stand on either side, their necks jammed between the cupboard and a pillar.

There is also a pair of larger cupboards crammed to bursting point. One is full of old poems and tales that have become the home for countless insects which scatter in such an unpleasant manner that no one cares to look at them any more; the other is full of Chinese books that have lain unattended ever since he who carefully collected them passed away. Whenever my loneliness threatens to overwhelm me, I take out one or two of them to look at; but my women gather together behind my back. 'It's because she goes on like this that she is so miserable. What kind of lady is it who reads Chinese books?' they whisper. 'In the past it was not even the done thing to read *sūtras*!' 'Yes,' I feel like replying, 'but I've never met anyone who lived longer just because they believed in superstitions!' But that would be thoughtless of me. There is some truth in what they say.

73 The rhythm here suggests a direct quote from a poem, but no satisfactory source has been identified. Misfortune will come from looking too long and too often at the moon and hence identifying with it; this was said to promote nostalgia, grief and premature ageing.

74 A reference to Poem 985 in the *Kokinshū* by Yoshimine no Munesada (Bishop Henjō): 'While on his way to Nara he heard a woman playing a *koto* in a dilapidated house. He wrote this poem and sent it in: *It seemed to be a dwelling where you might expect someone dejected to be living; and now I hear the sound of a koto that adds to the sadness of it all.*'