

**EDO SENRYŪ ON
WAKA AND WOMEN**

Introduced and Translated by
STEVE RABSON

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tel. 310-276-9522
fax. 310-276-0242
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an episodic festschrift for Howard Hibbett

Japanese literature
of the Edo period (1600-1868)
rendered into English
by his former students
of which this is
the twelfth volume

INTRODUCTION

Senryū poetry, usually composed in seventeen syllables, flourished during the middle and late Edo period, and is still written today. *Senryū* conveys a humor that is irreverent, earthy, often satirical, and sometimes “black” or grotesque. Frequently turning on scatological references and outrageous word plays, *senryū* humor might best be called, to use an English word play, pungent. Poems provide acute

glimpses of daily life in Tokugawa times; and, of human nature in all times. *Senryū* is written nowadays by individuals and by members of *senryū* composition clubs. Japanese newspapers publish regular selections of *senryū*, along with *tanka*, (also referred to as *waka*), usually composed in 31 syllables, and *haiku*, usually 17 syllables, in their poetry sections.

In contrast to *senryū*'s earthiness (or, maybe "earthly-ness"), *haiku* of the Edo period are more often evocations of nature that reveal moments of cosmic vision. Applying the "high-low culture" paradigm, *senryū* might fit into the category of "low culture" while *haiku* might be called "higher culture." According to this schema, *waka* might then be called "highest culture." Yet poets revel in the "low" status of *senryū* to poke fun at pomposity and pretense,

and to bring "high culture" down to earth. In the realm of literature, they have parodied works of Japanese classical poetry and prose, especially passages that are such frequent objects of citation and allusion as to have become clichés. The effect of this parody is often achieved by far-fetched associations, along with the outrageously irreverent punning common to many *senryū*.

Since these and other effects of *senryū* so often depend on word play, translation is no simple matter. Some commentary is necessary, and is usually provided with the Japanese originals. But lengthy explanations or footnotes can easily emasculate the humor. It is therefore with some trepidation that I offer a few translations, first of Edo *senryū* that parody *waka*—its language, traditions, motifs, and personae; and then of *senryū* that depict the status

of women in Tokugawa times with a sympathy and insight that might be surprising, considering that they were probably written by men. *Senryū* provided the poet, wearing the comedian's mask, with a vehicle for political and social criticism that could circumvent Bakufu censorship. Thus, poems make satirical targets of Neo-Confucian laws and customs, particularly those relating to the family, sexual relations, and, as in examples below, the double standard applied to men and women.

All poems presented here are anonymous, and were selected from Numata Keion, ed., *Yanagidaru hyōshaku* (Yayoi Shobō, 1983); Yamaji Kanko, comp., *Ko-senryū meiku-sen* (Chikuma Shobō, 1982); and Hamada Giichirō, comp., *Edo senryū jiten* (Tōkyō-dō, 1983).