

YANAGINO HAZUE
"WILLOW LEAFTIPS"

(1835)

TRANSLATED

BY

JOHN SOLT

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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 twenty-fourth volume

INTRODUCTION

SENRYŪ AND BAREKU

The roots of *senryū* verse lie in the *maekuzuke* that gained popularity from the late seventeenth century. *Maekuzuke* are 17-syllable poems (from the Meiji period called *haiku*) that capped a 14-syllable unit to make 31-syllables in a *haikai* sequence. The *maekuzuke* were judged in their own right, unlike the 14-syllable unit that never became independent. Karai Senryū (1718-1790) was a *maekuzuke* judge, whose 1759 *Senryū hyō manku awase* ("Collection of 10,000 verses with Senryū's Commentary") established his reputation to the degree that poems in the comic

vein he favored have been dubbed *senryū* ever since. They were written and appreciated predominantly by anonymous townspeople, but occasionally literati would gather at parties to compose them. Formats would vary according to the context, and it was not unusual for the participants to write on given topics. Unlike the more serious *hokku* (the 17-syllable, opening poem of a *haikai* sequence), *senryū* required neither a seasonal word (*kigo*) nor a cutting word (*kireji*). The lack of rules allowed for a wide range of participants and a variety of subject matter, ranging from the good-natured noting of the foibles of human nature to outright bawdiness and scatology.

Hokku, *maekuzuke*, and *haiku* are themselves not without humor, so the line between them and *senryū* occasionally blurs. As the distinction between *haiku* and *senryū* became more pronounced, a division emerged in *senryū* itself opposing the usual variety of comic *senryū* with the more risqué *bareku*. *Bareku* 破禮句 ("breaking propriety verse") was by definition taboo in polite society. Not surprisingly, much of the humor is also offensive today, both inside and outside Japan. For example, maids and widows

are invariably represented as epitomizing carnal desire, while noble women are joked about as frigid. No doubt the psychological yearning for coitus was distributed more equitably across social classes than *bareku* would suggest. In any case, the insights we gain from reading this type of poetry provide clues to excavating the vast array of customs, practices, fantasies, and stereotypes that were in operation at the time.

Few societies have afforded such direct glimpses of sexual attitudes as we find in *bareku*. *Bareku*, approximating the offbeat limerick—although in a briefer form—equally aimed at wit and precision. In the literary playfulness of *bareku* we discover not only the pathos of exploited women, but also of exploited men, such as those poems that refer to the Yoshichō district in Edo where women could buy male prostitutes, usually men in their early twenties who had been discarded as too old by their much older samurai lovers. *Bareku* more often than not are subtle in expression and dense with literary allusions. They comprise a subgenre that requires familiarity with the vocabulary of the highlife and lowlife of 175 years ago.

Contemporary sensibilities may be offended by implications of sexism, classism, ageism, or child abuse in *bareku*, but I present them anyway. Not to do so would be to indulge in self-censorship (which is one of the few indulgences that I do not allow myself) and create a barrier to the honesty of their mentality. My imaginary audience is open-minded enough to prefer a selection not based on what seems politically correct at the present time. If these poems in translation are at all provocative, it is a testament to the power of language and the inventiveness of the poets.

This material presents particular difficulties in addition to the usual trials and tribulations associated with translating. The foremost among them is the loss of the affectionate nuances in our present-day language for female and male genitals. In Japanese the words *bobo* for vagina and *mara* for penis convey an intimacy and naiveté of expression that are unmatched by the medical terms in English. Words such as “cunt, pussy, snatch, twat, quim, hole” or “dick, cock, member, crank, and rod” also do not quite match the originals. In our culture that politicizes the landscape of the body, connotations of

cuteness and intimacy for the most part have been drained from words depicting the genitals. In English “pussy” also signifies a cat—perceived as cute and feline—and therefore the word has retained a nuance close to *bobo*. Similar to pussy in denoting the female pubic region is the word “beaver,” another small animal known for its sleekness. Although thwarted at every turn, I chose to vary the English equivalents to escape redundancy.

“WILLOW LEAFTIPS”

Yanagi no hazue (“Willow Leaftips”) is a collection of *senryū* (*bareku*) published in 1835 and prefaced by Hitomi Shūsuke, the fourth generation head of the Senryū school. Hitomi did not contribute his own poems to *Yanagi no hazue*, but one section consists of a selection made by him.

The first *bareku* anthology, *Suetsumuhana* (1776; “The Safflower Princess,” named after a chapter title of *The Tale of Genji*, c. 1008), consisted of works selected by Karai Senryū from the 10,000 verses of *maekuzuke* he had judged in 1759. It was widely read and highly evaluated in its time and

has maintained the most prestige among *senryū* collections until the present day. In spite of its esteemed lineage, *Suetsumuhana* ran into a legal roadblock because of its erotic content. Following World War II there was a court case to ban its publication, but in 1950 under the authority of the American Occupation the anthology was granted the status of classical Japanese literature and allowed to be reprinted.

Between *Suetsumuhana* and *Yanagi no hazue* a series of *senryū/bareku* anthologies was published with the title of *Yanagidaru*; Karai Senryū edited 22 of them, and his successors 144. *Yanagi no hazue* (1835) was composed 59 years after *Suetsumuhana* and represents a fourth generation of *senryū* writing. The world had changed a great deal by then, especially the licensed quarters, which had once been for the affluent only but were now, with the rise of the middle class, more accessible to townsmen (and, to some extent, townswomen).

Until after World War II, *Yanagi no hazue* hardly circulated. If specialists came across it at all, they read it mostly in hand-copied manuscript form. After the war it was published twice in limited editions of a few hundred copies, but

almost immediately went out of print. *Yanagi no hazue* is still relatively unknown and has not been included in the main literary canon, perhaps also because it is indigestible to academia. Unlike *Suetsumuhana* whose ribald content was problematic but whose literary worth was undeniable because of the imprimatur of Karai Senryū, *Yanagi no hazue* has always stood at the margins of acceptability. Until recently only Okada Hajime had annotated the work and treated it as a serious literary production, predominantly finding interest in the linguistic content and the ways in which it provides a window into the customs and practices of the time. In the preface to his *Yanagi no hazue zenshaku* ("The Complete and Annotated 'Willow Leaf-tips'" 1956), Okada makes it clear that *Suetsumuhana* is of inestimably higher literary value than *Yanagi no hazue*.

"Both *Yanagi no hazue* and *Suetsumuhana* are collections of *bareku*, but *Suetsumuhana* was excerpted from the 10,000 verses evaluated by Karai Senryū, and it is a collection of elegant verses from the golden age of *senryū*. On

the contrary, because *Yanagi no hazue* is the product of Karai Senryū IV, the self-styled founder of loony verse (*kyōku*), there is a marked discrepancy in its literary worth in comparison to *Suetsumuhana*. In part it is the difference between *senryū* and *kyōku*, and it is nearly impossible to pick out elegant verses abundant in artistry from the loony verse of *Yanagi no hazue*. Rather, I should probably say these are all doggerel verses worthy of contempt.”¹

I was intrigued that Okada—the scholar who had invested so much time studying the work—felt a need to distance himself from it by dismissing its literary value. I also became curious about the low standards of Karai Senryū IV and wondered from what perspective he had introduced the original. In this gentleman known

¹ Okada Hajime, *Yanagi no hazue zenshaku*, Tokyo: Yūkō shobō, 1956, p. 3.

for pioneering loony verse, we can detect a similar unwillingness to stand up for *Yanagi no hazue*.

“Long ago Karai Senryū [lit.: ‘river willow’] widely gathered ribald poems, touched them up, anthologized them, and named the book *Suetsumuhana*. It became a bestseller and made a fabulous profit for the publisher. Unfortunately, it went out of print and its whereabouts have become lost over the [59] years in the interim. Recently, Akako [‘Red Child’] and Ryūsha [‘Dragon Abode’] held some *senryū* bashes with a bunch of bawdy poets. Humorous poems were gathered from here and there, made into a single volume, and cherry trees thereby blossomed forth. To have everyone remark, ‘Oh those are great poems!’ it was named *Yanagi no hazue* (‘Willow Leaf-tips’ [i.e., by using the word ‘willow’ the work is associated

with Senryū]). I was repeatedly cornered to write the preface, so I finally made my way down from Hakone, asked permission from the *gonin gumi* local authorities, and appended this note."

end of mid-Spring [1835]
Senryū IV²

For my first draft at translating a selection of the poems to introduce them in English, I used the Okada Hajime commentary from 1956. His book was a breakthrough as the first annotation in the more than one hundred years since the text had been published initially, and it was only superseded in 1995 by the commentary of Syunroan Syuzin (normally Romanized "Shunroan Shujin"), a pen name. Using a pseudonym emphasized that the taboo nature of the poems is still controversial in Japan.

² Ibid. pp. 11-12. Also in Omura Saga, "*Yanagi no hazue: sono shūhen*," Yoshida Sei'ichi (ed.) *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō*, Vol 48, No. 5, Tokyo: Shibundō, 1983, pp. 256-57

Masking the authorship is Syunroan's stab at imitating Edo hipness, and his name roughly means "Master of the Abode with Dew on the Roses of Sharon." The pseudonym is also a dodging of authorial responsibility, possibly for personal reasons. Nevertheless, Syunroan is excellent in detailing life at the time, and yet occasionally he finds more in the three-dimensional situation that he conjures up in his annotations than is locatable in the few words of the poems themselves, a common tendency among explicators of super-brief genres.

Yanagi no hazue was compiled from four poetry composition sessions (*kukai*) in which participants gathered to compose *senryū*. There are 57 contributors to the volume. Each participant chose three to five poems from the entire collection, except his own. *Yanagi no hazue* is a compilation of these lists of poems selected by the participants. There are a total of 628 poems. However, 98 are duplicates, having been picked by two or more poets.

The sessions were hosted by Ryūsha and Akako, two men in their thirties who were minor literary figures. They appear in *Senryū hyakunin*

isshu (1835; "One Poem Each by One Hundred Senryū Poets"). Other poets in *Yanagi no hazue* are also identified by pen names, but some chose logo symbols instead. For example, Hana Sanjin ("Nose Mountaineer"; 1786?-1859?), the famous author of *gesaku* (frivolous writings), is represented by a drawing of a nose. Few of the poets in the collection are known, and I am presenting their poems in translation without names or symbols.

A couple of points are worth noting regarding the relation between *bareku* and *shunga* ("erotic woodblock prints") or *shungabon* ("erotic books"). First, *senryū* authors used pseudonyms for literary purposes even though they did not need to conceal their identities, whereas *shunga* artists used pseudonyms or left their works unsigned because their erotic pictures were illegal. As outrageous as many of the *bareku* utterances were, the genre itself was considered legal and Senryū IV duly obtained the necessary permission for *Yanagi no hazue* to be published. Second, *bareku* perform the important function of providing a literary corrective to some of the artistic conventions found in *shunga* that otherwise might be interpreted as social

conventions. For example, we rarely find cunnilingus performed in shunga, and if we had no other evidence upon which to base a judgement, we might conclude that Edo Japanese found it unappealing not only to depict in a picture, but also to use as the subject of a poem. One glance at *Yanagi no hazue* and we are disabused of the notion, leading us to wonder conversely why *shunga* ignore the subject. By recognizing that the culture drew the line at pictures rather than words, we can avoid slipping into the pitfall of believing that merely because a sexual practice is absent from one genre does not preclude its presence in another genre or its existence in the society at large.

One can imagine that the poets, who were predominantly male, gathered, drank too much sake, laughed a great deal, and enjoyed literary parties using the medium of *senryū* to bond. *Bareku* have usually been judged as vulgar and therefore passed over by all but a handful of specialists. These poems have not made the canonical series issued by the publishing conglomerates. One of the strengths of *Yanagi no hazue* is its peripheral status, its emphatic refusal to be digested into the literary mainstream. Paradoxically, at this

juncture its literary value seems to rest largely on its resistance to being accepted as literature. Perhaps it is time to treat *Yanagi no hazue* and *bareku* as literature and—in concurrence with the legal decision regarding *Suetsumuhana* in 1950—to accept the genre as a valuable but opaque window into Edo culture that can be excavated as an artifact, fraught with half-mysteries and half-revelations.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

When I first started translating this selection of poems for the festschrift, I had the good fortune of being invited by Sumie Jones to read some of them in Bloomington (*Imaging/Reading Eros: Proceedings for the Conference "Sexuality and Edo Culture, 1750-1850,"* Indiana University: The East Asian Studies Center, Aug. 17-20, 1995 [published in 1996]). My poetry reading was accompanied by the voice and *shamisen* of Nishimatsu Fuei, *iemoto* (head) of the Nishimatsu School, who had turned several of the 17-syllable verses into songs. After the show, an aged professor whom I did not know approached me and said pointedly, "I can't believe that what resonated so charmingly from Fuei's mouth

sounded so vulgar from yours. I've never been so disgusted by anything in my life." I replied softly, "It was just for you."

I was impressed by Syunroan's erudite scholarship, and it propelled me to improve the accuracy of my previous translations. My manuscript also profited noticeably from Robin Gill, who generously checked it and made valuable suggestions. All mistakes are, of course, entirely my own. After I first introduced the subject of *bareku* in 1995, Gill followed my modest selection with a tome of 500 pages, *The Woman Without a Hole & Other Risky Themes from Old Japanese Poems*, Paraverse Press, 2007). His informative research on 18th-19th centuries Japan has laid a foundation for the subfield of *bareku* in particular and Edo-period sexuality in general.

My notes are based on the following two commentaries:

Okada Hajime, *Yanagi no hazue zenshaku*, Tokyo: Yūkō shobō, 1956.

Syunroan Syuzin, *Edo enku 'Yanagi no hazue' wo tanoshimu* ("Enjoying the Edo elegant verse of 'Willow Leaftips'"), Tokyo: Miki shobō, 1995.