

HAIKAI ON LOVE

A Hundred-Verse Linked Sequence

by Matsuki Tantan (1674-1761)

Introduced and Translated by
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of which this is
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INTRODUCTION

Matsuki Tantan was born into an Osaka merchant family the year after the ten thousand haikai at Ikudama shrine led by Saikaku, but by the time he began to write haikai the most innovative moment of the Danrin movement had passed, and the haikai center of gravity was perceptibly shifting toward Edo, where young poets gathered from around the country. So in 1700, the year his first known verse was published, Tantan set off for Edo, where he linked verses with Kikaku, along with Sentoku and Senshū, some of

the leading haikai poets in Edo. Kikaku, friend of Saikaku and protege of Bashō, developed, especially after Bashō's death, his own style of worldly, complex urban haikai which proved very popular. As the number of haikai masters and their followers in Edo increased, Kikaku and others also developed a format for ranking outstanding two-verse maeku links and publishing the best verses in anthologies. Much as renga masters had done centuries before with a less plebeian clientele, haikai masters were explicitly and with pride establishing themselves as professionals, and Kikaku criticized Tantan for his carefree attitude and for spending too much time on tea ceremony and love affairs. After much vacillation and a trip to the north that partially followed Bashō's route in *Narrow Road to the North*, Tantan edited an anthology in 1704 and in 1706 led a ten-thousand verse group sequence in Edo, establishing himself as a professional haikai master, although he tried to remain a traveler roving freely through the floating world.

Most contemporary poets considered Bashō only one outstanding haikai poet among

others, and, although a few Edo masters declared themselves followers of the "Bashō style," many regarded it as a form of modernized renga. Bashō's sensitivity and delicacy were valued, but it was mainly samurai literati and rural gentry who found Bashō's restrained, almost neoclassical style most attractive. Tantan expressed admiration for Bashō but wrote differently, mixing lyricism with realistic social detail, erotic overtones, and subtle metaphor. For unknown reasons he moved in 1708 to the more conservative Kyoto, where his style was largely ignored by local Teimon-style and Bashō-style poets. In 1711 he returned to Edo, where he published a collection of thirty-six verse kasen sequences, and in the following years he moved frequently back and forth between the two cities. In Kyoto poets began to gather around him, and in 1717 he became famous after publishing an experimental hundred-verse sequence on love in a haibun miscellany called *Divine Wagtails Mating (Niwakunaburi)*, named after the mythic birds which first taught the ancient gods how to copulate. Tantan continued to write sequences and travelogs and to anthologize single outstanding

poems, and in 1732 he moved back to Osaka, where he lived most of the rest of his life, marrying a former performing woman from the licenced quarters and developing a network of haikai poets around the country connected by his letters and his mobile protégés.

Tantan's anthologies had as much impact as his sequences and make him a pivotal figure, since he brought to single focus two parallel trends in zappai, where new ways of linking lines within verses were being explored, and in haikai, where different approaches to linking verses were being tried. In 1726 one of Tantan's followers edited *Shunjū no seki*, a novel anthology of single verses chosen by Tantan from sequences from various provinces, with the names of most of the authors unlisted. The preface suggests that each verse brings a context with it, and the anthology aims to develop a way of double reading. Verses are presented both as independent poems and as ways of gaining access to the poem's surrounding context; they are to be read both semantically and as indices of their own possibility. This and later anthologies of verses judged by Tantan helped to

spread the Osaka style of zappai and individual verse appreciation to Edo, where the *Mutamagawa* anthology (1750) began a rage for linking and reading single long (5-7-5) verses that culminated in popular anthologies of senryū. Tantan's stress on context and suggestion thus helped senryū become more than brief snapshots. Showing Tantan's influence, *Mutamagawa* opens with:

Plum blossoms
sleep embraced by
fermented soybeans

The context implies desire in the midst of a soybean fermenter's shop: a bonsai plum tree blooming in the warm room at New Year's is enfolded with tangible, almost infinite tenderness by the soybeans. The verse implies more than itself, as does, for example, this senryū (1767):

A mother finds
her daughter's dildo
and cries once more.

Grief mixes with humor as the mother, going through her dead daughter's belongings, weeps again and recalls how the young woman had not yet even slept with a man. Tantan also gave prominence to outstanding individual short (7-7) verses from sequences, whose brevity only increased their suggestion and mysterious depth. This practice was also influential in Edo, making possible collections such as *Haikai-kei*, whose short verses are even more resonant and evocative than its longer senryū-like verses.

A translation of the love sequence from *Divine Wagtails Mating* is presented below. It follows the text edited by Suzuki Katsutada (*Koten haibungaku taikei*, Shūeisha, 1972, 11:96-98) and gives short comments on the allusive links. The sequence evokes love in every verse and rejects several renga-style haikai conventions, replacing, for example, the moon and blossoms, the two most venerable images, with stars and pines. Tantan also stresses the importance of individual verses even more than had renga poets such as Shinkei. As a student of Zen, Tantan tried to make each link delicate and almost paradoxical, with interpretation becoming a form of realization or reconstructive

enlightenment. Thus one of his hokku goes:

Plum blossoms
quote in reply
'plum blossoms'

Similar subtleties link many of the verses in the love sequence, creating a striking mixture of mysterious depth and surface sensuality which helped change haikai history. At the same time, the verses, as in some Danrin sequences, often link in clusters, and the reader can find three- and four-verse overflows. The basic unit, however, is the two-verse link, and each verse except the hokku is to be read twice, both as a single verse and also in relation to the preceding verse. In this esthetics of change, the second reading will transform some or even most of the first reading. Polysemy is one of the goals of linked haikai, especially as practiced by Tantan, but for this translation I have presented only what seemed to be the most likely interpretation or semantic focus of verses and links based on conventions and usages of the age and genre. Readers are invited to look for more.

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