

**FORGETTING THE PAST,
FORGETTING THE PRESENT**

“Foreword”
and
“Biography of the Female Immortal,
Amnesia-grass”
Kokon monowasure (1772)
by Takebe Ayatari

Introduction and Translation by
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INTRODUCTION

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 ninth volume

Takebe Ayatari was one of the great literary and visual artists of the middle part of the Early Modern Period (ca. 1580-1880) in Japan. Together with such gifted contemporaries as Hiraga Gennai, Ueda Akinari, and Yosa Buson, Ayatari helped to

redirect individual and group expression in the media of painting, poetry, and narrative into new forms that continue to influence the Japanese arts today.

As we survey the various schools of poetry, prose, painting, religion, philosophy, and other fields that proliferated in Japan over the 1700s, it is helpful to identify a body of like-minded individuals who lived their lives embracing aesthetic concerns, but who at the same time refused to associate themselves with a particular organized "school." Ayatari and the others mentioned above shared this sense of detachment from the institutions current in their age, and lived each day in contact with a broad range of people, while at the same time rejecting the notion of a hierarchical organizational structure for their scholarly and creative activities. If Ayatari and the rest had lived in an earlier age we might have identified them as hermit-monks, scholar-recluses, or some other medieval religious term, but these eighteenth-century nonconformists

distinguished themselves from their monastic predecessors in one important respect. They shared a more secular world view that, while influenced by one or more schools of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, or Shinto, never allowed itself to become subordinated within a transcendent thought system. We might thus characterize these individuals from about 1720 on with the term *bunjin* or "persons of letters." This sense of being "lettered" or "cultured," as the character *bun* indicates, has a great deal to do with a similar attitude of detachment from worldly affairs and devotion to aesthetics that arose in China among the landed gentry several centuries earlier, and we can consider Ayatari and his contemporaries as self-conscious examples of a *bunjin* lifestyle as it was practiced in the eighteenth-century Japanese urban context.

Ayatari considered himself a *bunjin*. In fact, when he took on the sobriquet "Takebe Ayatari," he was in effect identifying himself as the "embellished (or cultured) descendant of Yamato Takeru (legendary hero of ancient Japan)." The second son of hereditary House Elders to the lord of the Tsugaru domain in northern Japan, Ayatari received the upbringing of a proud military family. However, at around age 20 Ayatari left his domain, perhaps as the result of a tragic love affair with his elder brother's wife, and traveled to the Kyôto/Ôsaka region to pursue a career as a *haikai* poet and teacher. Over the next two decades Ayatari developed a reputation as a leader in several fields, including painting in the Chinese émigré-inspired Nagasaki style, *haikai* poetry, and *haibun* prose. In his mid-forties, Ayatari again changed course in his vocation, rejecting conventional *haikai* in favor of the revival of an archaic verse form called *katauta*, found in

ancient Japanese literary texts. In the last decade of his life, Ayatari continued to promote *katauta* composition, and in his narrative fiction and other prose, experimented, often successfully, with infusing into these writings archaic (and pseudo-archaic) language.

Forgetting the Past, Forgetting the Present, published two years before Ayatari's death, is an example of the possibilities inherent in his experimentation with archaic diction. A parody on the interest in memory-strengthening techniques current in the early 1770s, *Forgetting* contains 56 short humorous vignettes on cases of lapsed memory, drawn from both historical and contemporary sources. The most extensive and engaging piece in *Forgetting*, however, is the first, the "Biography of the Female Immortal, Amnesia-grass." Ayatari succeeds in this narrative at combining a serious tone of almost religious reverence for the shaman-like teacher, with humorous content, in

which she is so skilled in her teaching that her disciples forget to bring their tuition payments, and she herself forgets to collect them. Furthermore, through his use of archaic language, Ayatari also demonstrated to his readers that as writers they could be effective, even entertaining, when they infused archaic language (as well as attitudes) into their texts.

I have prepared the translation from the following modern edition:

Tamaki Tsukasa, *et al.*, ed., *Takebe Ayatari zenshū* Vol. 6 (*Bunshū*). Tōkyō: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1987: pp. 251-65.

This modern edition, in turn, used the following source:

Takebe Ayatari, *Kokon monowasure*. 1 volume. Kyōto: Yoshinoya Shichibei, Umemura Sōgorō, and Asai Shōemon, Meiwa 9 (1772), 1st lunar month.