Changing Roles of Japanese Poetry in Medieval Society
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Japanese poetry is fairly well known throughout the world, as most English-speakers have at least heard of the haiku, although many do not understand its purpose. Poetry has a long tradition in Japan, over time occupying a large place in society. However, the change in poetry throughout its existence both in form and situation is equally as important as the role of poetry itself. Through examining the historical context of poetry, changes in both style and societal role can be seen, and shows that the importance and adaptability of Japanese poetry during specific time periods as well as the unchanging traditions behind it help it to survive today. Before exploring reasons and motivation behind the development of medieval Japanese poetry, it is important to look for significance in the role of poetry at the time. From there, we can look for the causes of changes, not only just in poetry, but for the poets and Japan as a whole.

The first known poetry in Japan was the Kaifūsō, “Fond Recollections of Poetry”, a poetry compilation written in 751, the late Nara period. There was poetry present in the country much earlier, as the Kaifūsō pulled works from centuries earlier in its compilation, but this was the first gathered and written book of poems. Although the compilation was Japanese in origin, it was written entirely in the Chinese language, as Japan had not yet developed its own writing system. Since the Japanese revered China, its arts and its culture — Chinese-language poetry at the time — had a higher status than those written in Japanese. The influence of the T’ang dynasty brought a huge cultural growth to Japan in the “early modern” art era of China, and Japanese scholars preferred literature to any religious or scientific pursuits, especially in later years (Varley 83-84). As such, literature gave an author a large amount of prestige as compared to his non-literary counterpart, and it became not only a scholarly pursuit, but a very fashionable element of the Japanese court. As the compilation itself shows, it was also a viable form of entertainment enjoyed by readers who were educated in Chinese. A certain scholar could be extremely well-read in Confucian texts, but would still be less popular and overshadowed by a counterpart with a poetic focus. This was the first rise to prominence of poetry in Japan, and it would continue to play a role in court society for centuries to come, although that role would not always stay the same.

Chinese poetry as one of the first manifestations of poetry was the point from which everything changed. Japanese society was already changing as a young nation, from Chinese underling to independent nation, and poetry was no exception. It and its prominent position were instrumental in the development of a Japanese writing system during the Heian period, which lasted from 794-1185. The Man’yōshū (“Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves”) contained 4516 pieces of poetry from as far back as several centuries before its publication in the first Japanese-language collection of poetry, and used the Yamato language (Yamato being the name of the nation in early times). This was a huge change, as the language was previously used by women not included in Chinese scholarly pursuits who had to use their own language. Yamato was also being written with the new kana syllabary, invented by the priest Kükai in some sources (Varley 51). Kana began to infiltrate the men’s poetry writing as well in a shift away from Chinese poetry. These works were written in the waka style, full of courtly elegance. The Kokin Wakashū, “Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems” or Kokinshū for short, was published in the early 900’s and contained the first literary criticism in Japan in its introduction, written in Japanese by its compiler. Tsurayuki: however, a second introduction was prepared by a Chinese scholar, showing the power that Chinese still had a language of prestige (Addiss et al.). The Man’yōshū was written right around the beginning of the Heian period, which made it also a near contemporary of its predecessor, the Kaifūsō. In fact, many authors appeared in both works and both languages, showing the period of transition in effect in the country, and having both languages published so recently represents the change that was occurring in Japan. Obviously, poetry did much for the advancement of Japanese culture, but its split from China was the real reason for this change, as Japan modified the inspiration it had taken from China and made its own culture, an important step in the nation’s development.

Poetry developed even further later on in the Heian period, as waka poetry became an everyday indispensable part of court life, ritualized and taken very seriously. Waka poetry was defined by its five lines with a rigid syllable structure of 5-7-5-7-7. Not only were there a proper number of lines and syllables, but proper themes and means of expressing those themes, or even expressing emotion, which seems like it would more logically be a spontaneous exercise. While Chinese poetry may very well have had the same level of rigidity and formality, the serious, scholarly Chinese works varied slightly from the court-based waka. In addition, both men and women now wrote waka poems, and male and female roles were especially important in Heian love poetry, unlike Chinese scholarship. Love poetry was a large part of courtship and court ritual. Formalities were important, with a prospective lover judged by the fold of his letter paper or the length of her hair in what seems a shallow, superficial guideline but is rooted in traditional court values and ideals, as a husband or wife would be expected to uphold such attention to detail in court for years to come. Poetry was well ensconced within these court rituals, and such a seemingly frivolous activity was essential to the Japanese court. Even today the Japanese emperor composes poems in the spring,
and Heian courtiers’ compositions helped define their place in upper society, illustrating the leisure and high status that they had.

In her introduction to poetry translations from two well-known women from the early Heian era, Ono no Komachi (mid-800s) and Izumi Shikibu (974-1034, estimated), Jane Hirshfield gives us insight into the female side of court. Women’s role in society was somewhat limited, and women were expected to obey her male relatives throughout her life, from her father to her son, as well as advance the family’s status via marriages. The married women in the court were, understandably, somewhat bored, and many turned to writing poetry as a means of keeping themselves occupied as well as illustrating their pursuits in love and loss (Hirshfield xiv-xv). There was also a large amount of etiquette involved in court poetry, with formal poems required for many stages of courtship. Formality ruled in the area of romance, as for court women’s seemingly frivolous pastimes, “[t]he skills, subtle judgment, and taste demonstrated in... above all the writing and recitation of poetry, figured greatly both in one’s appeal as a prospective romantic partner and in one’s prospects for official advancement” (Hirshfield p. xii). This rigid social structure did not stop at just women, even dictating the secret rendezvous of amorous couples, with lovers expected to provide letters to their sweethearts at exact times. The men were usually the initiators of said poems, while the women had nothing to do but wait and wonder if their love was coming back to them. This resulted in many poems lamenting the absence of a beloved or mourning one whose passions had cooled. It was only through poetry that women were able to have any say in their social situations, and judging by the lasting impact of the poems left behind, they nearly perfected the form. They adapted poetry to their means, and it would seem to be one of the most significant roles that poetry played in the Heian court era of Japan, which shows that poetry is not limited to its current form but can change with a surprising amount of fluidity, especially considering how rigid the guidelines were for Heian poets.

Even in the early novels of the Heian period, poetry was still prominent, though it supported the story instead of standing alone. The Ise Monogatari portrays Ariwara no Narihira as its hero, a fictionalized version of a real Narihira; this was interesting, as he was a poet himself, and actually appeared through his poetry in the Kokinshū. Described as “a faded flower with a lingering fragrance” (Tsurayuki via de Bary 384) due to his more restrained expressive style, Narihira was nevertheless one of the more famous poets in early Japan, used here in a different context; that of storytelling. Some of his poems are contained in the Ise Monogatari, and their theme of love is a topic tied closely to poetry at that time in Japan’s history. In The Tale of Genji, the world’s first novel, in and of itself a marvel, its many protagonists use poetry as the go about their lives and intrigues and adventures in the stories. In it, the authoress Lady Murasaki could even pen her own literary criticisms and opinions through Genji, the main character, as in a scene where Genji first laughs off, and then seriously considers love stories, weighing their apparent meaninglessness with their “evoking the emotion of things in a most realistic way” (de Bary 201). This was not only a victory for the court ladies subject to Genji’s criticism, but for Lady Murasaki herself and her tales. Although not writing about poetry, Genji’s reference to emotion seems to tie the importance of fiction to similar traits in poetic works. The presence and usage of the poetry itself in these two works indicates further the huge role that poetry played in society. Not only was poetry a form of art, it was used by characters on given occasions as a part of daily life. While still within the court, it is clear that poetry was not limited to one type of composition or poet.

After the Heian period, the rise of the warrior class and subsequent warring such as that in the sengoku or warring states period brought about stagnation in court poetry and diminished its role in Japanese society. This can be demonstrated clearly by the example of Minamoto no Sanetomo, one of the Kamakura shoguns. Considered to be one of the greatest poets of the time, he was nevertheless not fit for his position, unable to rule with the political savvy that those before and even around him were capable of using. Easily manipulated, he was caught in a ruthless power struggle, and was possibly manipulated even in his position of theoretical power. In 1219, Sanetomo was murdered in a plot that is speculated to have been hatched by his own mother Masako, the “kimono-clad Lady Macbeth” (Souyri 51). However, his poetry lived on, even as Masako’s power diminished in the rise of the warrior class. Even in the courtiers, who did not share the heavy responsibilities of Sanetomo, waka poetry seemed to decline, if not in practice than surely in importance. The country at war would have placed much more emphasis on physical strength, battle, and wartime prowess than composing the proper verse for any occasion. I would argue, too, that even love poetry would not have been as important, as many a marriage was made for alliances and strategic planning rather than as a result of careful courtship. Although I cannot truly verify this stance, it could be suggested by the power of Hino Shigeko, wife of Ashikaga shogun Yoshinori, as well as that of Hino Tomiko who married Yoshinori’s son Yoshimasa, becoming one of the “three demons” during the Muromachi century (Souyri 168). Poems could not have had the same importance to the new ruling leaders, and even its adaptability could not stretch so far to keep its former glory in the courts.

Poetry had quite a struggle to stay relevant, but the change in situations during the beginning of the Kamakura period brought about the invention of renga, linked poetry, a socially-oriented form of poetry popular among peasants and courtiers alike. Renga had the same general structure of waka, that 5-7-5-7-7 syllable rigidity, but without the imposing of proper themes.
and word choices. In addition, the poem split in two, with one poet composing the first three lines while a second supplied the last two. The social aspects of renga, requiring people to work together to compose linked verses, helped bring classes together and made poetry more accessible to everyone, which was important in the time frame as power was shifting. As the court split into North and South courts for almost a century following the Kamakura period, tensions involved made the definition of the ‘court’ much more complicated and help facilitate another rise to power. Obviously, waka poets could not continue as they had, and something about poetry would have to change. The older imperial regime lost not continue as they had, and something about poetry would have to change. The social aspects of poetry's influence spread from other forms of literature such as the novels of the Heian court to even influencing and mixing flawlessly with other art forms and their aesthetics. In the Heian period came the more solidified forms of these aesthetics, including wabi, aware, yuugen, and sabi, adding to miyabi, court elegance or refinement, that defined poetry as a courtly art form.

As we can see earlier through its relationship with prose such as Genji, poetry did not stand alone in Japanese culture, although it had the strength to do so. Many of the art forms of medieval Japan influenced and supported each other; in poetry's case, this was mainly calligraphy (shodo) and tea ceremony (sado), all traditional, historical forms “characterized, among other things, by cross-generational transmissions (often reaching back through many centuries) of essential conventions and protocols.” (Kamens 53) Even painting was included, since it also used the ink and brushes that were used in writing Japanese script, and included in the Man'yōshū anthology was even a poem about painting (Addiss et al 31). As it related to writing and brushstrokes, calligraphy would obviously have a strong connection to poetry, although it was not limited to just poems and put more emphasis on writing style than content, while tea ceremony's connection to poetry is more hidden. Tea ceremony was full of complexity and feeling, and relied heavily on concepts valued in Japanese culture, such as elegance, simplicity and humility, similar to the feelings expressed in poetry.

A large part of poetry was its aesthetics, or that which was considered beautiful in the medium. This was not limited to Japanese poetry, but is distinct to the culture, not only for the time period of medieval Japan but even continuing to present times, and it, too, developed throughout Japan's history. Its presence in tea ceremony can be seen in wabicha, wabi-tea - tea ceremony with attention to the wabi aesthetic, one defined by “a simple, unpretentious beauty; an imperfect, irregular beauty; and an austere, stark beauty” (Varley 160). This wabicha was invented by the famous tea master Sen no Rikyū in the 16th century, and while the presence of such aestheticism may seem too weak a link to poetry, the master used a Heian court poem to explain the wabi concept:

To those who wait
Only for flowers,
Show them a spring
Of grass amid the snow
In a mountain village.
(via Varley 160).

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Parents sobbing for their children, children searching for their parents -- never before have I seen such a pitiable sight.

\begin{verbatim}
no mo yama mo
yakitake ni you
musha no koe
sanagara shura no
chimata narikeri
\end{verbatim}

The hills are ablaze
with the cries of soldiers
intoxicated
with their pyrolatry--
the battleground of demons.

(468-469).

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of sadness, melancholy, and longing, often translated as ‘moving’. As someone relatively unfamiliar with Japanese culture, I would still say that such a word describing complex human feelings, used in the context of poetry, conveyed more meaning than simpler, flatter words: “surprise”, “sadness”, “pity”. In a discussion of The Tale of Genji, the word ‘moving’ or ‘aware’ is used no less than six times in describing different parts and aspects of the work. This shows the power and importance of aware in Heian Japan. Woven into traditional poetry topics such as seasons, aesthetics created a distinct Japanese-ness that influenced all of the culture throughout the centuries.

In my opinion, the presence of aesthetics in Japanese poetry is one of the strongest points for the way that poetry in Japanese society lasted. Poetry and aesthetic senses both changed, one gaining broader situations and the other deeper meanings, and it could even be said that they changed together in a deep cultural connection. Although it is arguable that poetry was the cause of the development of aesthetics and ideas of beauty in Japan, poetry both influenced and reflected the culture it was in, as well as echoing the history of the art form. Even today there are still remnants of Heian-era poetry. In my personal experience I have found that an understanding of Japanese history and culture, especially poetry, has helped me understand much of the literature, poetry, and even song lyrics I have come across from modern Japan. In fact, poetry continues to change and adapt to circumstance, as even modern-day Japanese women are composing tanka (another term for waka) on their cellphones (Dvorak). Poetry is deeply a part of Japan, and these changes show that it is not going anywhere anytime soon.

Poetry at the end of the medieval period was very different from its beginnings. From the change in language to change in authorship to change in context, it is not very hard to see the shifts that occurred. However, it is equally significant that some things stayed the same, reflecting the essence of Japanese culture and tradition as seen through the words of its people. As put by Fujiwara Teika, himself a Heian compiler of poetry, “There are no teachers of Japanese poetry. But they who take the old poems as their teachers... who of them will fail to write poetry?” (de Bary 204). It was essential that poetry change from scholastic to ritual to social to practical usages, but at the same time there was a historical connection that kept it firmly within Japanese culture from the very first break from China’s poetry, and its importance only increased with time. In another quote from Fujiwara, “the art of yamato-uta (Japanese poetry) seems shallow but it is deep; it seems easy, but it is difficult. There are few who understand it.” (Addiss et al. 34) The supposed shallowness of the poetry makes it an accessible art form, but the complex layers and difficulty of definition is what gave Japanese poetry depth and strength it needed to survive through the centuries.

Works Cited


