

Emperor Yuryaku's Poem
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1 The first poem in the *Man'yoshu* is traditionally assigned to the Emperor Yuryaku, which dates it between the years 456-479 CE (Shirane, 63). Therefore, one feature that makes this poem interesting is that it is the earliest surviving piece of literature in the Japanese language, or attributed to the group of people called the Japanese. Although this signification is usually attributed to the text of the *Kojiki*, and as a whole, indeed, the complete *Kojiki* (712 CE) is older than the complete *Man'yoshu* (759 CE), this one element of the *Man'yoshu* is traditionally thought to be the single oldest surviving work of literature because the *Kojiki* is traditionally attributed to one writer who compiled a rich oral tradition and rewrote other literary works from memory, works that have not survived. However, the first poem of the *Man'yoshu* is traditionally attributed to the actual hand of the Emperor Yuryaku. That is, it is not a rewriting from memory, nor a copying of an oral tradition. As such, the Yuryaku poem from the *Man'yoshu* is an important poem that exhibits features and qualities that can be found in poems across different cultures around the world, and thus, many people can appreciate the beauty found therein.

2 Perhaps it will be noticed that I repeatedly use the word "traditionally" in the attributions of the works in the *Man'yoshu* and the *Kojiki*. This is because much scholarship has been produced throughout the ages that calls into question these traditional attributions (Keene, 55). That is to say that it must be admitted that the Emperor Yuryaku, in fact, did not write the poem, and therefore the date of composition must also be accepted with a grain of doubt, and thus the poem might not be as old as traditionally claimed.

3 The poem begins with a speaker calling to a girl who is picking herbs, asking her name (Shirane, 63). This gives the impression that the speaker is trying to woo the girl, and perhaps seduce her. This seems like a common theme in the history of poetry, not only in Japan, but all over the world. I cannot count the number of poems I have read where a man finds a girl he is attracted to, and tries to talk to her, or seduce her, or, using more popular language, pick her up. Indeed, one does not have to research only poetry to find a scene like this. Many young adolescents from everywhere learn pick-up lines in order to try to get a girl to like him. I don't think that the speaker in this poem is much different.

4 In these opening lines, one thing that stands out is the repetition. In the first line, "Your basket, with your lovely basket," the speaker repeats the word "basket," the second time describing it with the adjective "lovely." The second line has a similar effect, even repeating the same adjective but describing her trowel, "Your trowel, your lovely trowel." Using an enduring adjective like "lovely" to describe, not the girl, but the things the girl has with her, is evidence that lends to the idea that, indeed, the speaker is trying pick-up the girl.

5 This might raise the question, then, if he is trying to pick her up, why does he not call her lovely instead of calling her basket and her trowel lovely? Nowhere in the poem does the speaker call the girl lovely, or pretty, or anything like that; he restricts his complements to the basket and the trowel. One reason he might do this is because he does not want to be too direct. Perhaps being too direct would scare the girl away, and he would not want to do that. When trying to initiate conversation with a girl today, even, doesn't a guy sometimes complement, not the girl, but something is wearing, or has with her? He might complement a piece of jewelry, or a her drink, or a book she is reading. Perhaps there is a complex psychology that might describe the reason for this. Guys might do this because if they complement the girl directly, calling her pretty, they might be rejected, and embarrassed. However, if the conversation begins, not about the girl, but about her basket, or her book, or her jewelry, then his thinly veiled intentions might allow conversation to continue, even if the girl is not initially interested. After all, what is a girl supposed to say after being told she is pretty? In that split second, she has to decide whether to accept the guy's advances, or reject him. Therefore, the guy has imposed that much

more pressure or stress upon her. However, if he complements her trowel, that allows conversation to continue about the trowel (even if they both know his real intentions), it allows her a few more moments to size him up, and make a decision as to whether or not he is worthy of her attention. In fact, giving her that extra moment to decide might be one reason for the repetition in the first two lines of the Yuryaku poem.

6 It is possible that the repetition in the first two lines is there because the poem was originally a song. I have tried to consistently refer to the speaker of the poem as a "speaker," and not a writer. (In that case, perhaps it is more appropriate to refer to him as the singer.) Repetition has been used through the history of poetry all around the world, and it has been shown that the original medium of poetry is not paper and ink, but the sound of voice. In researching the *Iliad* by Homer, scholars have shown that the poem was originally sung by poets (Lombardo, xxii). In fact, in conservative and traditional circles, Homer is traditionally regarded as the inventor of the Greek alphabet in order to write his songs (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) for future generations. The many repetitions in these early poems have been shown to be a function of the singing of poetry. That is, having repeating elements in a poem makes it easier for a singer to remember the lines before they had the luxury of reading the poem off a piece of paper in their hands. The Yuryaku poem seems to have this sort of feature.

7 When we listen to popular songs today, in fact, repetition is an essential feature. During the chorus, how many times does Carly Rae Jepsen plead, "Call me maybe"? So it seems quite possible that 1500 years ago, Yuryaku also recognized the importance of repetition in song, and called to the girl, "with your basket, with your pretty basket." Perhaps the speaker was trying to woo the girl by singing her a song. And as part of this song, he asks for her name.

8 Of course, it is only polite, if one asks another for her name, he should offer his own name. It is this which the speaker does in the second half of the poem. Clearly, there is a break between the first half of the poem, and the second half. The first half was trying to woo the girl, complementing her basket and her trowel, and then asking her name; the first half of the poem focusses on the girl. At this break, the poem then shifts attention to the speaker.

9 In shifting attention to himself, the speaker reveals himself to be the emperor. This is not said explicitly; he does not say something like, "I am the emperor." Rather he reveals this in a more roundabout way, using repetition when saying, "In the land of Yamato... it is I who conquer and reign, it is I who conquer and rule" (Shirane, 64). This second half of the poem raises many questions. The first is that, in not calling himself emperor, but rather ruler of the land, is he, in fact, the emperor? It might be that at this time, using the traditional date of between 456-479, this sort of ruler did not call himself emperor, despite holding the position and playing the role that today we would call emperor over all Japan (Ooms, 20). Therefore, in this time period, what would it have meant to be emperor? Perhaps he did not rule over such a great expanse of land, but only a city, or a province. In the poem he claims to rule over an expanse that can be "seen from the sky." How much land did he imagine that was? Certainly he had never been in the sky himself, and could not accurately describe what could be seen from the sky, so what exactly did he rule over?

10 He proclaims that it is "the land of Yamato" that he reigns over, but that still does not give us any specific answer to the question of what he rules over. What is Yamato? Looking in history books, there are many different cities, provinces, and places that use Yamato as a name (Kidder, 97). Certainly there are scholars who equate the name Yamato with the name Japan, but this is not without controversy, and alternate theories abound. Therefore, it might be that the speaker who claims to rule over Yamato is little more than a local chieftain who is trying to boost his own ego in front of a young girl he is trying to seduce.

11 If he is the ruler of Yamato, regardless of whatever Yamato refers to, why is it that he is trying to seduce this girl? The first half of the poem describes her as having a basket and a trowel, and as "you who picks herbs on this hill." Why would one who reigns over the land of Yamato be entranced by a country girl who is out picking herbs? Such a simple, common girl does not seem to be of the type that

would either be appropriate for a great ruler, or that a great ruler would want to pursue. It might be that this poem is trying to express an romantic ideal that even a great emperor can be impressed by the beauty of this commoner. Or perhaps, along the same lines, it may be that all of the women who would be appropriate for this ruler, or those whom he is surrounded by somehow bore him, and he is entranced by this girl who is so different from those people he is accustomed to.

12 Another theory put forth by some scholars is that she is the daughter of some rival local chieftain (Keene, 56). If this is the case, perhaps he is trying to seduce her because he wants to marry her in order to form a political alliance. Indeed, then he would rule over even more land "seen from the sky." This interpretation also helps make sense of the lines in the poem when he says, "it is I who conquer..." When we look at the current Japanese Emperor, it is doubtful he would ever describe himself as one who conquers. This is because the nation of Japan is no longer in the business of expanding its land through warfare. However, the speaker in this poem expresses that he does conquer. As such, he gains lands, and one way to expand his territory would be marry into political alliances with rival local chieftains, and thus the purpose of seducing this young girl.

13 This interpretation of the motivation for political marriage, although plausible, does not seem to me to be within the text of the poem. Such an interpretation seems to require a the addition of a lot of information that, even accounting for Japanese honorifics that cannot be seen in the English translations, still does not seem to be there.

14 One final question that is raised in the second half of the poem is in the last two lines. "Let it be me who speaks of my house and my name" (Shirane, 64). Why does he say this? This seems to be in contrast to the end of the first half of the poem where he asks the girl to "Speak of your house, speak of your name." Does he no longer want to hear her name, or where she comes from? Furthermore, it seems curious that he would make such a proclamation, especially after he has already indirectly spoken of his name and his home: he is the conqueror and ruler; his home is the Land of Yamato. After he has described himself in the second half of the poem, it seems, after trying to seduce the woman, he is reminded of how great he himself is, and wants to keep talking about himself. Certainly, I can imagine even a guy today, in trying to pick up a girl, somehow becomes so self absorbed that all he talks about is himself. Is that what is happening in this poem?

15 It might be that the speaker is an egotistical Casanova, but it has been argued by scholars that this poem, with its clear break of two halves, was originally two different, separate poems (Keene, 56). If the traditional attribution to Emperor Yuryaku is dismissed, this can be easily seen. The first half of the poem can be read as a simple love poem, a man trying to win over a girl he sees in the hills. Looking at the second half of the poem, it can easily be read as a declaration by some ruler about the nature of his land. The last two lines then make more sense. He has told us about his land, now prepare to hear more, of which he does not speak. It is almost an invitation to future poets, be they rulers or not, to write more about the, either their rule (if they are a ruler), or the land (if they are not). Indeed, if this is the case, then it seems to be a perfect introductory poem for the *Man'yōshū*, and it serves as a great segue to the second poem, traditionally attributed to the Emperor Komei (thus dating it between 629-642 CE), in which he describes his his land from the vantage point of a hilltop as beautiful (Shirane, 65). Given the interpretation that this poem was originally two different poems, it might have been the similarity between the last lines of each half of the poem that helped some compiler think that they would fit together well as one poem.

16 Despite discrepancies found in the Yuryaku poem, the value of the poem, as a whole, cannot be denied. It might be that the poem is, in fact, two different poems that have been combined into one over the years. But the use of repetition, primarily the last lines of each of the two halves, lends the feature of unity that ties the poem together, and makes it a beautiful poem. Another unifying element is that each of the halves refers to the land. An appreciation of the land and of nature is a recurring theme of Japanese literature throughout the ages. Thus, the Yuryaku poem serves as a wonderful introduction as the earliest surviving piece of literature in the Japanese language.

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