

THREE POETS AT MINASE

[*Minase Sangin*]

In the first moon of 1488 three of the greatest masters of linked-verse, Sōgi (1421-1502), Shōhaku (1443-1527), and Sōchō (1448-1532) met at Minase, a village between Kyoto and Osaka. As part of an observance at the shrine, which stood on the site of the Minase Palace of the Emperor Gotoba, they composed one hundred verses, of which fifty are here translated.

The art of linked-verse was an extremely demanding one. Generally three or more poets took part, composing alternate verses of 7, 5, 7 syllables and 7, 7 syllables. Many rules had to be observed exactly: for example, if spring or autumn were mentioned in one verse, the following two to four verses also had to mention it. However, it was not necessary that the actual words "spring" or "autumn" be used, many natural phenomena, such as mist, blossoms, or singing birds, stood for spring, while others, such as fog, the moon, or chirping crickets, stood for autumn.

Beyond the technical difficulties imposed by the rules of linked-verse were the major consideration of keeping the level so high that it would not run the risk of resembling a mere game, and the problem of making each "link" fit smoothly into the chain. Any three links taken from a sequence should produce two complete poems. Thus:

*Except for you
Whom could I ever love,
Never surfeiting?*

*Nothing remotely suggests
The charms of her appearance.*

*Except for you
Whom could I ever love
Never surfeiting?
Nothing remotely suggests
The charms of her appearance.*

Even plants and trees
Share in the bitter grief of
The ancient capital.

Nothing remotely suggests
The charms of its appearance.
Even plants and trees
Share in the bitter grief of
The ancient capital.

Here we have two poems of entirely different meaning linked together the first concerns a lover's delight in his mistress, the second the grief of the poet over the destruction of the capital. This kind of multiple stream of consciousness is a uniquely Japanese literary development, and was fostered in part by the ambiguity of the Japanese language, which permits many varieties of word play and is extremely free in the use of pronouns.

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TEXT

Snow yet remaining
The mountain slopes are misty—
An evening in spring.

Sōgi

Far away the water flows
Past the plum-scented village.
Shōhaku

In the river breeze
The willow trees are clustered.
Spring is appearing.

Sōchō

The sound of a boat being poled
Clear in the clear morning light.
Sōgi

COMMENTARY

Early spring (mist). Allusion: "When I look far out, the mountain slopes are misty. Minase River—why did I think that only in autumn the nights could be lovely?" (by Emperor Gotoba).

Spring (plum blossoms). Description continued. Water.

Spring. Description continued, far scenery. Water.

Water. Dawn. Near scenery.

- The moon¹ does it still
Over fog-enshrouded fields
Linger in the sky?
Shōhaiku
Autumn (moon). Dawn.
- Meadows carpeted in frost—
Autumn has drawn to a close.
Sōchō
Autumn.
- Heedless of the wishes
Of piping insects,
The grasses wither.
Sōgi
Late autumn The insects wish
that the winter would not
come.
- When I visited my friend,
How bare the path to his gate!
Shōhaiku
Late autumn. The grasses have
withered, exposing the path.
- Remote villages—
Have the storms still to reach you
Deep in the mountains?
Sōchō
Late autumn. Villages so re-
mote that winter has yet to
reach them.
- In unfamiliar dwellings
Is loneliness and sorrow
Sōgi
Emotional verse leading from
loneliness of remote villages.
- Now is not the time
To be thinking of yourself
As one all alone.
Shōhaiku
Buddhist rebuke (or consola-
tion?) for emotion expressed.
- Did you not know beforehand
That all things must fade away?
Sōchō
Impermanence. Buddhist senti-
ment continued.
- The dew grieves for its
Early passing and grieves for
The flower that stays.
Sōgi
Impermanence. The dew is
shorter-lived even than the
flower it clings to. Parable for
man and the things of beauty
in the world. Spring.

During the misted darkness
Of the last rays of the sun.

Shōhaku

Spring (mist). Evening.

The day has ended.
Joyously singing, the birds
Return to their nest.

Sōchō

Spring (birds). Evening.

I walk deep in dark mountains,
Not even the sky my guide.

Sōgi

Evening. Travel.

Although it has cleared
My sleeves are soaked with showers—
This traveling cloak.

Shōhaku

Travel. The sleeves are wet not
only with rain but with tears
caused by his lonely journey.

The light of the moon reveals
My wretched pillow of grass.

Sōchō

Travel. "Pillow of grass" de-
notes a journey. The traveler
with tear-wet sleeves is dis-
closed by the moon. Night.
Autumn (moon).

Many are the vain
Nights unvisited by sleep
As autumn deepens.

Sōgi

Night. Autumn. Love (lying
awake at night).

In dreams I quarreled with her;
A wind was stirring the reeds.

Shōhaku

Night. Autumn (reeds). In his
dream he quarrels with his be-
loved, and wakens to hear the
wind. Love.

I looked—all were gone,
The friends I loved at home,
Vanished without a trace

Sōchō

Dream. When he awakens
(like Rip van Winkle) his
friends are all dead. May also
refer to women he loved. Love.
Old age.

Years of old age before me,
What is there on which to lean?

Sōgi

Old age—friends are gone.

Faded though they are,
At least I still have my songs—
Take pity on them!

Shōhaku

The poems of an old man.

They too make good companions
When the sky is at twilight.

Sōgi

Loneliness relieved by poetry.

Today in clouds
I crossed the peak and found
The blossoms scattered.

Sōchō

Spring (blossoms). What he thought were "clouds of cherry blossoms" were only clouds. Link: sky-clouds. Clouds may be companions.

Listen! did you hear the cries
Of the wild geese of spring?

Shōhaku

Spring. Link: geese flying over peak.

How bright the moon is
Without the haze—drowsy one,
Wait, just a little.

Sōgi

Spring (hazy moon). Link: Geese flying under moon, familiar subject of painting. Enjoins him not to fall asleep when the moon is so lovely (not the usual hazy spring moon).

Lying in dew, on my way,
I see an autumn daybreak.

Sōchō

Autumn (moon of previous verse taken in different sense). Link: moon-daybreak.

Over the villages,
Far off, beyond the last field,
The fog is settling.

Shōhaku

Autumn (fog). Description continued.

There comes with the blowing wind Autumn (cloth-beating). The
The sound of cloth-beaters' mallets. sound emerges from the fog.

Sōgi

Even freezing days
In the evening find me
In thinnest garments.

A lonely, poverty-stricken
scene. Luk: cloth-garments.

Sōchō

How forlorn a way to live— Poverty. A humble wood-
The mountains where I gather brush. cutter.

Shōhaku

"Yet there may be hope,"
I thought, but this way of life
Has come to an end.

Poverty. Despair.

Sōgi

Ah, the misery of it!
Whither now shall I turn?

Poverty. Despair.

Sōchō

Parting after bliss,
Resolved to wait as long
As life is left me.

The misery of poverty shifts to
the misery of separation after
making love. Love.

Shōhaku

Still it lasts—what does it mean?
This longing I feel for her.

Love. Separation.

Sōgi

Except for you
Whom could I ever love,
Never surfeiting?

Love.

Sōchō

Nothing remotely suggests
The charms of her appearance.

Love.

Shōhaku

Even plants and trees
Share in the bitter grief
Of the ancient capital.

Sōgi

Link: the beloved's appearance
shifts to the appearance of
Kyoto before the disastrous
Ōnin Rebellion which devas-
tated the city (1467-1477)

The sad house where once I lived
Is now but a remembrance.

Sōchō

Destruction caused by the re-
bellion.

Let this keepsake
Of a mother not long dead
Bring consolation.

Shōhaku

Death brought about by rebel-
lion.

In the months and days to come
I'll see her perhaps in dreams.

Sōgi

In time to come he will only be
able to see his mother in
dreams.

Sailing for China,
I will take a final leave—
Farewell to these shores.

Sōchō

Even if he goes to China he
will see her in his dreams.

Let us hearken to the Law
We come not to this world again.

Shōhaku

"These shores" interpreted as
the mortal world, as opposed to
the "other shores" of Paradise.
The Buddhist Law.

Till we two could meet
How frequently did love's tears
Fall and melt away.

Sōgi

Meeting with Buddha in Para-
dise shifts to meeting a woman.
Love. Autumn (tears, literally
"dew").

Ah, it was the autumn wind,
Not she I was waiting for.

Sōchō

Autumn. There is a pun im-
bedded meaning "weary of my-
self."

A pine-cricket
All in vain is chirping now,
In my weed-grown house.

Shōhaku

On the mountain I staked out
Now lodges only the moon.

Sōgi

I awake from sleep
To the tolling of the bell,
My dreams unfinished.

Sōchō

I have piled upon my brow
The frosts of night after night.

Shōhaku

Autumn (pine-cricket). It chirps in vain because she does not hear it. The house is deserted.

Autumn (moon). Links to loneliness of preceding verse. Pun: "shines clear" for "lodges."

His plans for the future are interrupted.

With age his hair turns white, as he remembers as he lies awake at night.

TRANSLATED BY DONALD KEENE