



ISSN: 1500-0713

---

---

**Essay Title:** The Night Crane: Nun Abutsu's Yoru No Tsuru

Introduced, Translated, and Annotated

**Author(s):** Eric Esteban

**Source:** *Japanese Studies Review*, Vol. XIX (2015), pp. 135-166

**Stable URL:** <https://asian.fiu.edu/projects-and-grants/japan-studies-review/journal-archive/volume-xix-2015/esteban-the-night-crane-final-version.pdf>

---

---

**FIU** | **Asian Studies  
Program**

**THE NIGHT CRANE:  
NUN ABUTSU'S *YORU NO TSURU*  
INTRODUCED, TRANSLATED, AND ANNOTATED**

*Eric Esteban*  
*University of Florida*

**Introduction**

Near the end of her life, the woman known in history as Nun Abutsu (1222–1283) authored the epistolary *Yoru no tsuru* (The Night Crane), a poetic treatise (*karon*) in a genre largely dominated by men. Together with her best-known work, *Izayoi nikki* (The Diary of the Sixteenth-Night Moon, 1283), *Yoru no tsuru* became the capstone to not only her literary career as a female poet and scholar of the mid-Kamakura period (1185–1333) but also her political career as consort to a scion of Japan's premier poetry house, the Mikohidari (also referred to as the Mikosa or Nijō). Indeed, despite the fact that women during the medieval age were not as prolific in the genres of tales (*monogatari*) and memoirs (*nikki*) as their Heian predecessors, it would be a disservice to women like Abutsu to claim that women's literature was on the decline.

It seems that Abutsu did not adopt the name by which we now know her until she took the tonsure in 1275 at the death of Fujiwara no Tameie (1198–1275). No information remains of Nun Abutsu's genealogy except that she was adopted by Taira no Norishige. As a provincial governor who provided wet nurses (*menoto*) to descendants of Retired Emperor Takakura (1161–1181; reigned 1168–1180), Norishige placed his teenage daughter into service with the cloistered emperor's granddaughter Princess Ankamon'in (1209–1283). Thus, Abutsu's earlier sobriquets while in court service always included the name of her patron: Ankamon'in no Echizen, Ankamon'in no Uemon no Suke, and Ankamon'in no Shijō.<sup>1</sup>

Abutsu wrote of her youth through *Utatane* (Fitful Slumbers, ca. 1238), a retrospective memoir that describes a love affair with a high-ranking noble.<sup>2</sup> According to her account, she flees from the palace and receives the

---

<sup>1</sup> John R. Wallace, "Abutsu-ni," *Medieval Japanese Writers*, ed. Steven D. Carter (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> For a translation of *Utatane*, see John R. Wallace, "Fitful Slumbers: Nun Abutsu's *Utatane*." *Monumenta Nipponica* 43/4 (1988), pp. 391–398.

tonsure, but she eventually returns to continue her palace service.<sup>3</sup> After this liminal period of which little factual evidence exists, Abutsu relocated to Hokkeji to live as a lay nun in 1250.<sup>4</sup> Christina Laffin describes this time in her life as a “hiatus from court life” where she continues to sharpen her knowledge of *The Tale of Genji* through mentoring other women at the Nara-based temple, but Laffin notes that she never truly ended her service to Ankamon’in.<sup>5</sup> Her scholarly devotion to poetry and the *Genji* was soon rewarded when Abbess Jizen recommended Abutsu to the Mikohidari heir Tameie and his daughter Go-Saga’in Dainagon no Suke (1233–1263), who needed someone to make a transcription of the *Genji*.<sup>6</sup> It was hence through this pivotal recommendation that Nun Abutsu entered the Mikohidari poetic tradition through a professional and romantic relationship with its current heir.

Asukai no Masaari’s diary *Saga no kayoi* (Visits to Saga, 1269) shows that Abutsu’s career flourished in the 1260s, a time when she was a highly regarded lecturer of the *Genji* and lived with the aging yet youthfully

---

<sup>3</sup> To better set the tone for her account, Abutsu makes extensive allusions to *The Tale of Genji*. Given the nature of these allusions, one must assume Nun Abutsu obtained a copy of the masterpiece to use at her disposal. On the reception of the character Ukifune in *Genji*, see for example Joshua S. Mostow, “On Becoming Ukifune: Autobiographical Heroines in Heian and Kamakura Literature,” in *Crossing the Bridge: Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers*, ed. Barbara Stevenson and Cynthia Ho (New York: Palgrave, 2000); or Christina Laffin, “Lover and Nun,” in *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2013), pp. 60–98.

<sup>4</sup> Much of this biographical information scholars have gleaned from *Genshō waka kuden* (The Oral Teachings of Genshō on Poetry, ca. 1293–1299). Genshō (1224–1303) was Abutsu’s stepson. Christian Ratliff, “Telling Secrets: *Mumyōzōshi*, Abutsu, and the Transmission of Literary Expertise by Women,” *Jinbunkenkyū: Kanagawa Daigaku Jinbun Gakkaishi* (2009), pp. 43–44.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Laffin, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2013), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

joyful Tameie in his Ogura villa.<sup>7</sup> Although no extant documentation exists to confirm that Abutsu was Tameie's principal wife,<sup>8</sup> Wallace, Laffin, McCullough, and Tabuchi consider her residence with Tameie and his separation from his former primary wife, the Daughter of Utsunomiya no Yoritsuna (1200–1279), as markers of Abutsu's transition from consort to wife.<sup>9</sup> She bore him three sons at this time: Jōgaku (b. 1258), Tamesuke (1263–1328), and Tamemori (1265–1328). Her sons were at a distinct political and hereditary disadvantage against Tameie's three other sons from his previous marriage: Tameuji (1222–1286), Genshō (1224–1303), and Tamenori (1227–1279). By 1256, Tameie had already willed to his eldest son Tameuji the rights to the lucrative Hosokawa estate, the primary source of Mikohidari income and repository of its most treasured documents.

As a scribe, copyist, and established poet who undoubtedly had access to the Mikohidari manuscripts, Abutsu rightfully felt that her own sons deserved, at least partially, Tameie's inheritance. In 1271, Abutsu ambitiously transferred some of these documents to her other residence, the Hokurin of the Jimyō'in estate, and by the following year she had convinced Tameie to bequeath the rights to the Hosokawa estate to her son Tamesuke instead. Thus began the dispute between Tameuji and his stepmother that would persist even after Abutsu's death and end with the division of the Mikohidari into three lines of succession: the Nijō branch of Tameuji, the Kyōgoku branch of Tamenori, and the Reizei branch of Tamesuke.

---

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, "Abutsu-ni." p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Hulvey states that, "no evidence survives to ascertain if she ever became Tameie's principal wife," in "Abutsu-ni" in *Japanese Women Writers: A Biocritical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 4; Hulvey refers to Abutsu-ni as "onna aruji" on p. 5 (female head of household) Onodera, p. 12 cites her twice as "concubine" (*sokushitsu*) and never refers to her as "wife" or otherwise. Onodera Shō, "Yoru no tsuru ni miru Abutsu-ni no karon no kōsatsu," *Kokugo kokubun* 8 (1971), pp. 16–24.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, *Utatane*, p. 392; Laffin, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women*, p. 115; Tabuchi Kumiko, *Abutsu-ni*, Jinbutsu sōsho (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2009), pp. 261, 81–82; Helen Craig McCullough, *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 289.

### The Mikohidari

Although regarded as the first widely circulated and still extant *karon* written by a woman,<sup>10</sup> Nun Abutsu's treatise serves as proof that the author kept the tradition of the Mikohidari poetry school when placed in the context of treatises written by men from Tameie's lineage. The Mikohidari was founded by Fujiwara Nagaie (1005–1064), who was the sixth son of the powerful courtier Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1027), but the transmission of authority and specialized knowledge became increasingly important closer to the Kamakura period (1185–1333). The Mikohidari, which housed the innovators of the twelfth century, rivaled the Rokujō faction, known as scholarly traditionalists, in two types of opportunities for recognition in court poetry life: the chance to judge poetry contests and the high honor of compiling royal anthologies.<sup>11</sup>

The Mikohidari household and literary collection boasted a lineage of the period's renowned poets: the great arbiter of poetry Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204), his son the scholarly Fujiwara Teika (1162–1241), and finally his grandson Fujiwara Tameie. Given the wealth of knowledge amassed in the past century by three generations of preeminent court poets, Abutsu's son Tamesuke had much to lose had it not been for the resourcefulness of his mother. After Tameie's death in 1275, Abutsu sued Tameuji to uphold the legitimacy of the late Tameie's revised will that bequeathed the Hosokawa estate to Tamesuke after first having left the estate to his eldest son Tameuji. Abutsu weighed her options between the law of the royal court in the capital and the law of the shogunate at Kamakura, the latter of which dealt with steward's rights and recognized revisions to a will.<sup>12</sup> Her strenuous journey to Kamakura in 1279 at an advanced age to make the case for her son was recorded in her well-known diary *Izayoi nikki*. The final section of her diary can be read as a legal brief arguing the case of her family's rights to inherit the Hosokawa estate and thus the Mikohidari school. This brief is written completely in an obsolete form of verse, the *chōka* (long poem), the form that provides enough space to describe the merits of her son and her case.

---

<sup>10</sup> Two other *karon* written by women precede *Yoru no tsuru: Waka shiki* by Princess Hiko and *Koshibe zenni shōsoku* by Shunzei's Daughter. For a discussion of these works, see Ratcliff, pp. 25–50.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1961), p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, pp. 344–345.

Abutsu passed away in 1283 before the military government at Kamakura ruled in favor of Reizei Tamesuke's steward rights to the Hosokawa estate eight years later.<sup>13</sup> However, the court also ruled that the Nijō faction of Tameuji's line reserved the rights of the Mikohidari poetic documents. Before her death, Abutsu tried to prevent her stepson from regaining all the household's precious manuscripts. Scholars cite a passage from Kitabatake no Chikafusa's (1293–1354) *Kokinshū jochū* (Annotation to the *Kokinshū* Preface, 1346–1370):

There are two chests with writings about waka composition by Lord Teika. One has a picture of a cormorant inlaid on the lid, the other a picture of a heron. The chests, called "Cormorant" and "Heron," did not leave Lord Tameie's side. When he died, her ladyship, the nun Abutsu, took the poetic treatises with her when she went to Kamakura. The heir, Lord Tameuji, later lodged a suit against her, and because of this Kameyama In issued a proclamation to the military government in Kamakura. When the time came for the disputed documents to be given to Tameuji, an old catalogue was used to ensure that all the documents were handed over. But the papers contained in the Cormorant and Heron must not have been well known to his lordship, because they were kept back while other papers were substituted and passed over in their place.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these precautions made around the time of her trip to Kamakura, Abutsu would never know if her political efforts were enough to ensure the rights of her son and ultimately defend her stance as a Mikohidari poet. Consequently, the time was ripe for her to commit to paper a *karon* of her own poetic knowledge passed down through Tameie's lineage.

### **The Cormorant, Heron, and Crane**

Compared to other *karon*, *Yoru no tsuru* was given an evocative title. Firstly, the work's titular image, a crane at night, is a metaphor of deep

---

<sup>13</sup> Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, pp. 344–345.

<sup>14</sup> Konishi Jin'ichi, *A History of Japanese Literature: The High Middle Ages*, trans. Aileen Gatten, vol. 3 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1991), pp. 259–260.

maternal love. Nun Abutsu likens herself to a crane in her *chōka* at the end of *The Diary of the Sixteenth-Night Moon*:

<i>ko o omofu tote</i>	Longing for her beloved child,
<i>yoru no tsuru</i>	like a crane at night,
<i>nakunaku miyako</i>	she weeps as she departs
<i>ideshikado</i>	from the capital.
<i>mi wa kazu narazu</i>	She is of humble stature
<i>Kamakura no</i>	in Kamakura,
<i>yo no matsurigoto</i>	where many affairs of state
<i>shigekereba</i>	grow thick and rampant. <sup>15</sup>

This is not the first time a Mikohidari used the image of a crane to elicit pity. Fujiwara Shunzei wrote a poem to Fujiwara Sadanaga (1149–1195) on behalf of his son Teika, who is referred to as a “reed-dwelling crane.” Shunzei asked for his son to be pardoned by Emperor Go-Toba after one year had passed since Teika’s misconduct at the palace.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, with the establishment of Tsurugaoka Hachimangū in 1063, the crane became a symbol of Kamakura, where Abutsu waited for adjudication regarding the Hosokawa estate and likely finished writing *Yoru no tsuru*.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, Abutsu might have chosen this aquatic bird to symbolically associate her work with the two previously mentioned chests kept from Tameuji, the Cormorant and Heron, which stored poetry manuscripts that would legitimize authority for whichever poetry faction retained them. Truly, Abutsu made clear that although she was not a direct descendant of the celebrated poets Shunzei and Teika, her claim to the Mikohidari tradition for her son was not to be challenged even after Tameie’s death.

Nun Abutsu’s *karon* was known by other names as well. Eleven texts of *Yoru no tsuru* have been identified, the names of which are mostly

---

<sup>15</sup> Yanase Kazuo and Takei Kazuto, *Izayoi nikki, Yoru no tsuru chūshaku*, (Osaka: Izumi shoin, 1986), p. 278.

<sup>16</sup> The poem reads, “The year drew to a close / with the reed dwelling crane / still wandering on cloud paths. / Now will spring mists, too / be allowed to block its way?” Translated by Robert Huey, *The Making of Shinkokinshū*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Yanase and Takei, *Izayoi nikki*, p. 286.

variations on *Abutsu kuden* (Abutsu's Oral Teachings).<sup>18</sup> Other titles refer to Nun Abutsu's court name, Ankamon'in no Shijō, while one refers to her writing as *hiden* (secret teachings). Nevertheless, these various titles indicate that in the centuries following her death, her teachings were widely disseminated, making *Yoru no tsuru* the first *karon* by a woman to have such a widespread impact on poetic composition.

### **Dating**

One could interpret Abutsu's writing, given the frequency of her indirect references to Tameie, as evidence that Tameie had already died at the time of her writing. Thus, one can place with some certainty the *terminus a quo* for the treatise after Tameie's death in 1275. A debate persists, however, whether or not she finished her work before her journey to Kamakura in 1279. Yanase and Takei believe she finished *Yoru no tsuru* while she was in Kamakura.<sup>19</sup> The scholars reference the end of the treatise in which she likens herself to "a rotting tree in a valley" (*tani no kuchiki*) and do not believe it is mere coincidence that in *Izayoi nikki* she records that she finds lodging near Kamakura called Tsukikage (Moonlight) Valley.<sup>20</sup> Tabuchi does not consider this concrete evidence as the phrase could simply be a poetic phrase referencing her old age or her own self-deprecation.<sup>21</sup> No examples for this particular phrase, however, can be found in *Shinpen kokka taikan*, perhaps because the phrase is six syllables (*jiamari*) and therefore inconvenient to use in the five-seven syllabic prosody of *waka*.<sup>22</sup> Laffin states the work was finished by 1276 given her regular attendance at poetry contests.<sup>23</sup> Most biographies on Nun Abutsu date the composition of *Yoru no tsuru* to circa 1279.

---

<sup>18</sup> For a textual history of these eleven texts, see Yanase and Takei, eds. *Izayoi nikki, Yoru no tsuru chūshaku* (Osaka: Izumi shoin, 1986), pp. 468–472.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>21</sup> Tabuchi, *Abutsu-ni*, p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> The expression *tani no mumoreki* (a tree buried in obscurity) is quite similar to the phrase and is found in *Senzaishū* 1163 [Collection of One-Thousand Years; abbreviated as SZS] (1187). A less similar expression, *miyamagakure no kuchiki* (a rotting tree hidden in the mountains), can be found in *Kokinshū* 875 [Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern; abbreviated as KKS] (ca. 905); Yanase and Takei, *Izayoi nikki*, p. 446.

<sup>23</sup> Laffin, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women*, p. 121.

### *Patronage*

If *Yoru no tsuru* represents a transmission of poetic knowledge, then for whom was Abutsu's treatise intended? To begin, the writing style of her epistle sheds some light on the matter. Abutsu makes use of the polite supplementary verb *sōrō*, a copula which humbles the writer before the recipient. Nevertheless, one can assume that the patron of her treatise was a high-ranking individual. In the preface to *Yoru no tsuru*, she writes that her work is intended for "someone difficult to refuse" (*sarigataki hito*) and instructs that it never be shown to anyone else. Given that not all medieval poets of established reputation wrote poetic treatises, Christian Ratcliff considers this solicitation as a hallmark of the *karon* genre. He writes, "Rather, such adjudications were solicited from or independently produced by a limited number of men (usually senior poets) who were recognized as arbiters of poetic production, through combinations of personal achievement, literary lineage, or familial prestige."<sup>24</sup> The Mikohidari *karon* which precede *Yoru no tsuru*, however, were intended for the writers' pupils. Such was the case for Teika's *Maigetsushō*, which was purportedly addressed to Minamoto Sanetomo<sup>25</sup> (1182–1219), as well as Tameie's *Eiga no ittei*, which was to be used as poetic instruction for his son Tamesuke.<sup>26</sup>

The identity of Nun Abutsu's *sarigataki hito* remains unknown, but scholarship hitherto on this topic has given a descriptive profile. The aforementioned use of humble language throughout the work suggests the patron is of high rank. Furthermore, the person who commissioned the work is likely a young woman. Not only has Abutsu addressed a woman before in *Menoto no fumi*, internal evidence in *Yoru no tsuru* lends to the argument for a female patron. Abutsu devotes the final section of her treatise to impromptu poetic exchanges and cites the encounters of Koshikibu no Naishi (d. 1025) and Suō no Naishi (d. 1110), female court poets who were able to outwit noblemen through swift poetic composition. Closing her work with this topic not only alludes to her court experience serving Princess Ankamon'in, but

---

<sup>24</sup> Ratcliff, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Brower, "Fujiwara teika's *maigetsushō*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 40/4 (1985), p. 401.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Brower, "The Foremost Style of Poetic Composition: Fujiwara Tameie's *Eiga no ittei*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 36/4 (1987), p. 393.

also tailors her work to suit the concerns of an aristocratic woman whose reputation hinged on her ability to compose poetry.<sup>27</sup>

In light of this profile—a woman of high rank young enough to be concerned with handling impromptu poetic responses—scholars have attempted to pinpoint a name for the patron of Abutsu's *karon*. Hosoya Naoki proposed that Abutsu wrote *Yoru no tsuru* for the principal wife (*kita no kata*) of the seventh shogun, Prince Koreyasu (d. 1326) by citing an account of her pedagogical relationship to this woman in Kamakura recorded in a later, somewhat fictionalized, narrative of her life known as *Abutsu Azuma kudari* (Abutsu's Journey East).<sup>28</sup> This implies that the patron was based not in the capital, but in the shogunate base of Kamakura. Hosoya's argument remained largely unchallenged throughout the rest of the twentieth century until it was questioned by Tabuchi Kumiko in the last decade. Tabuchi contends that if the woman who commissioned the work had been based in Kamakura, notably where the families of shogun greatly needed the cultural expertise of those living in the capital, then there would be no reason for her to write with such deference to the recipient.<sup>29</sup>

A patron based in the capital, therefore, was more likely to be found within the social circle of either Princess Ankamon'in or the Ichijō family.<sup>30</sup> Abutsu entered the high profile Ichijō social circle after Tameie's death in 1275 through invitations to two poetry contests: the *Kenji gannen kugatsu jūsan'ya sesshōke jūban utaawase* (First Year of Kenji Ninth Month Thirteenth Night Regental House Poetry Contest in Ten Rounds) and the *Jūshichiban shiikaawase* (Chinese and Japanese Poetry Contest in Seventeen Rounds).<sup>31</sup> Such invitations could certainly have led to an appeal by an Ichijō woman to Abutsu to codify her poetic knowledge into a *karon*. Nevertheless, one cannot forget the tenderness of the work's titular image and conclude that regardless of the woman's rank in court society, Abutsu likely thought fondly of her patron, perhaps to the extent that a mother would feel for her daughter. Within her treatise, Abutsu suddenly breaks from her didactic tone to reveal a more frank and intimate conversation with her—"For now, then, I shall write and attach here only what I can recall for certain while your

---

<sup>27</sup> Laffin, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women*, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Hosoya Naoki, *Chūsei karon no kenkyū* (Kasama shoin 1976), p. 344.

<sup>29</sup> Tabuchi, *Abutsu-ni*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Laffin, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women*, p. 117.

messenger is here.”<sup>32</sup> Such a relationship deepens the meaning of *sarigataki*, which, although at first can be attributed to the author’s deference to the addressee, can be better translated as “difficult to separate from.”

### Late-Medieval Realism

What is clear from *The Night Crane* is that Abutsu emulates Tameie and his predecessors through her frequent use of indirect quotations to past treatises and the occasional duplication of example poems. As copyist for Tameie, it is not difficult to imagine she was charged with the task of copying these documents treasured by the Mikohidari. Her instructions mirror most of all the advice found in Tameie’s *Eiga no ittei*: she never mentions him by name but instead closes her remarks with phrases such as “so I had heard” (*tote soraiki*). However, one must emphasize that her work should not be seen as a mere iteration of *Eiga no ittei*—Abutsu, to a certain extent, does make original observations. Therefore, her extensive references to Mikohidari teachings can be better characterized as an assertion of her authority as a poetic commentator.

One can argue that the beauty of poetry is found in its ambiguity of expression, in which metaphors and hyperboles result in a multi-layered depth of meaning, or the fanciful imagination of a poet evokes profoundly different emotions for different readers. Accordingly, a modern reader would likely give pause when Abutsu instructs her pupil not to compose on what is not true and instead to compose on reality.<sup>33</sup> She advises against what she refers to as *soragoto* (literally, “empty words”), which can be interpreted to mean fictitious elements or falsehoods, and by association, the use of simile or metaphor.<sup>34</sup> She advocates for poems on the four seasons which describe “matters just as they are” (*ari no mama no koto*)—perhaps a response to the prevailing approach to poetry which favored conventional, elegant imagery which may or not be faithfully descriptive.

In tracing the development of poetry from the Mid-Classical Period (1100-1241) to the Late Classical Period (1241–1350), Brower and Miner might agree with the observation that Nun Abutsu lived during a transitional period of poetic ideals. The Mid-Classical Period of Japanese court poetry saw an increase in the esthetic distance between the poet and the speaker of

---

<sup>32</sup> Yanase and Takei, *Izayoi nikki*, p. 390.

<sup>33</sup> See Translation Section XII.

<sup>34</sup> Morimoto Motoko, *Izayoi nikki, Yoru no tsuru zenchūshaku* (Tokyo: kōdansha, 1966), p. 207.

a poem as well as a newfound appreciation for profundity of expression, valued by Mikohidari luminaries Shunzei and Teika.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, poets of the Late Classical Period sought after an ideal of verisimilitude, which Brower and Miner describe as, “the desire of these poets to make distinctions and discriminations, to emphasize particularity, and above all to convey the actuality of a moment of intense experience, whether of nature or in the course of a love affair.”<sup>36</sup>

In terms of poetic style, the Nijō, generally speaking, followed the orthodox approach advocated by Tameie and his forefathers, using only traditional diction in elegant verses, as well as the prescriptive list of *nushi aru kotoba* set by Tameie in *Eiga no ittei*.<sup>37</sup> Taking a more innovative stance, the Kyōgoku-Reizei used unostentatious diction and advocated describing matters “just as they are” (*ari no mama*) even at the risk of losing elegance; they had less concern for Tameie’s prohibitions.<sup>38</sup> The Nijō scoffed at this forthright approach to composition. On the style of Kyōgoku Tamekane (1254–1332), an anonymous Nijō author writes in *Nomori no kagami* (The Fieldguard’s Mirror, 1295?), “Tamekane teaches that one should express one’s feelings directly just as one likes; instead of adorning his feelings with words, he composes as if he were writing prose.”<sup>39</sup> The poets of the Kyōgoku-Reizei alliance would not have the literary authority and solidarity as poetic households if not for the actions of Nun Abutsu in 1279. Consequently, her prescriptive stance to compose on reality can be seen as evidence of the burgeoning ideal of truthfulness that would be fully realized in the decades following her lifetime.

### Discussion

From both a historical and literary perspective, Nun Abutsu left an enduring impression that would last through the rest of Japan’s medieval period—an impression perhaps not sufficiently discussed in Western scholarship. One can concede that much of Nun Abutsu’s legacy lies not in widely-praised poetry or premier literary commentary but rather in her politically astute and at the same time motherly maneuvers during the

---

<sup>35</sup> Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 299.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>37</sup> Konishi, p. 390.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Steven D. Carter, *Waiting for the Wind: Thirty-Six Poets of Japan’s Late Medieval Age* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), p. xvi.

turbulence of the Kamakura period. Yet even with respect to the famous Mikohidari lawsuit, which Carter claims to be “one of the longest and most all-encompassing literary disputes in world history,” biographical evidence paints two different pictures.<sup>40</sup>

Her stepson Genshō of the Nijō writes her into history as an infamous woman with a sinfully cunning mind, while Asukai no Masaari shows a scholarly woman who commanded respect and was the beloved of an heir to the Mikohidari. Putting these portrayals aside, the fact remains that Abutsu secured for her son Tamesuke the literary authority needed to establish the Reizei poetic household; unquestionably, she was the founder of the Reizei branch. It is to Abutsu that we owe the variation in approaches to poetic composition seen towards the end of the medieval period, and without her, Brower and Miner hazard the notion that “Japanese Court poetry might have passed serenely into extinction.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, the Reizei household stands to this day as the only remaining poetry house among the three branches of the Mikohidari, currently headed by Reizei Tamehito (1944–). Their treasured collection was initially catalogued in 1980 with the establishment of the Reizei Family Shiguretei Library and boasts tens of thousands of documents.<sup>42</sup>

This is not to de-emphasize her personal literary contributions to the Japanese canon, however. Among the hundreds of her extant compositions, a respectable forty-eight of them were included in the last eleven of Japan’s royal anthologies.<sup>43</sup> In writing *The Night Crane*, she crosses the boundaries of gender by entering a male-dominated genre and opens a didactic conversation between two women. Her scholarly efforts as a lecturer of *Genji* and her service to Princess Ankamon’in were vital assets to her literary success, and in this scholarly devotion we are reminded of the Heian author of the *Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu, who is remembered for her unorthodox knowledge of classical Chinese. *The Night Crane* represents the finely wrought philosophy of the Mikohidari school, yet Abutsu’s original commentary foreshadows the development of a new style to be practiced by the Kyōgoku-Reizei faction.

---

<sup>40</sup> Carter, p. xii.

<sup>41</sup> Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 344.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Brower, “The Reizei Family Documents,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 36/4 (1981), p. 446. The Reizeike Shiguretei Bunko now has a website: <http://reizeike.jp/>.

<sup>43</sup> Iketa Kazuko. “Kajin Abutsu-ni.” *Chūō daigaku kokubun* 13 (1970), p. 38.

Nun Abutsu's commentary was well-received by literary critics across both poetic factions and across centuries following the completion of *Yoru no tsuru*. Like other treatises on poetry written by the eminent men who came before her, her work was disseminated and cited by critics throughout the medieval period. During the Nanbokuchō period, *renga* poet Nijō Yoshimoto (1320–1388) cites *The Night Crane* in his own treatise, *Kinrai futei* (Poetic Styles of the Recent Present, 1387).<sup>44</sup>

Her treatise later reached readership in Japan's Kantō region by the 15<sup>th</sup> century as evidenced by the writing of priest Junsō in his *Ungyoku wakashō* (Notes on the Collection of Cloud Jewels), a commentary on his personal poetry collection of the same name.<sup>45</sup> By the Sengoku period (1467–1603), the warrior and poet Hosokawa Yūsai (1534–1610) named *The Night Crane* as one of the *Waka rokubushō*, six essential writings on poetry which should be kept at one's side.<sup>46</sup> Her work would continue to influence literary criticism into the Edo period (1603–1868), in which it was often referred to as *Abutsu's Oral Teachings*.

Invariably, Nun Abutsu was acclaimed as a Mikohidari poet not merely because she was associated with its final heir Tameie, but because she established an enduring literary authority of her own through *The Night Crane*. Shunzei and Teika's maxim "*kotoba furuku, kokoro atarashi*" (old diction, new treatment) rings true for the literary career of Abutsu and Japanese poetry as a whole, for we find that medieval poets were given the difficult task of striking a balance between tradition and originality. They extolled poems from the golden age of the *Kokinshū* yet yearned to establish new aesthetics while they felt the pressure of political change. *The Night Crane* represents Nun Abutsu's success in codifying her experience as a poet who managed to meet this challenge, and it is through this work that we see that medieval Japan saw no shortage of innovative thought in the realm of court poetry.

#### Note on Translation

*Yoru no tsuru* was partially translated into English by Satō Hiroaki in 2007.<sup>47</sup> The present complete translation relies on the text found in Yanase

---

<sup>44</sup> Tabuchi, *Abutsu-ni*, p. 235.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>47</sup> Satō Hiroaki, *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), pp. 116–122.

Kazuo and Takei Kazuto, ed., *Izayoi nikki, Yoru no tsuru chūshaku*. This edition has detailed annotations as well as a modern Japanese translation. The translation follows the sections and headings devised by Yanase and Takei. Additionally, the commentary found in Yanase Kazuo, ed., *Abutsu-ni zenhū*, was occasionally consulted when interpreting certain passages.

### THE NIGHT CRANE

#### I. Preface

Though I had been told again and again to “teach how to compose poetry” by someone difficult to refuse I respectfully declined, explaining that I could teach no more or no less than what I truly understood. Still the appeals saw no end, so I was left no choice but to write down what I could without direction. This is not to be shown to anyone else under any circumstances.

#### II. The Way of Poetry and Reading

The masters of the Way of Yamato Poetry have afforded us, broadly speaking, the availability of works passed down for future generations,<sup>48</sup> the recreations belonging to poetry houses,<sup>49</sup> and the knowledge of every learned individual. Therefore, I, equipped with poor words, do not know where I should begin now after so long. As for expressions such as “moon from a distance” (*hisakata no tsuki*), “foot aching mountain” (*ashihiki no yama*), “jeweled spear path” (*tamaboko no michi*), “dreams black as lily seeds” (*mubatama no yume*),<sup>50</sup> or “shining red” (*akanesasu*) to describe “the rising sun” (*idzuru hi*), the same seems to be said whichever place-name glossary you choose. I advise you to look closely upon these old texts.

Though before you is the little left I can remember in my dotage of what I happened to hear from those who are called upon to compose poems,<sup>51</sup> I fear my words are all but mere fallacies.

---

<sup>48</sup> Refers to standard poetry manuals or introductory studies.

<sup>49</sup> Refers to secret teachings exclusive to the Mikohidari family.

<sup>50</sup> These phrases are commonly used pillow words (*makura kotoba*). Pillow words in Japanese poetry are epithets typically five syllables in length used to enhance the tone of a poem, but their original meanings are now unclear.

<sup>51</sup> In other words, Tameie.

### III. Grasping the Essence of a Topic

I recall that [Fujiwara no Ason] Kiyosuke once wrote in his treatise, *Selected Beginner Studies*,<sup>52</sup> “If one is to compose poetry, then one must first fully comprehend the essence (*kokoro*) of a topic.” Additionally, “It is most unappealing to exhaust all of one’s choice words in the upper verse and leave nothing of substance to say in the lower verse, thus resulting in a disconnected poem,” or so it was said. He continues, “Consider someone who begins a poem on the topic of mountain villa deutzias<sup>53</sup> with a quite amusing line”:

<i>yamazato no</i>	Along the fence
<i>kakiho ni sakeru</i>	of a mountain hamlet bloom
<i>unohana wa</i>	these deutzias

In an attempt to invent a proper ending, he writes,

<i>wakikabe nureru</i>	as would lacquer
<i>kokochi koso sure</i>	on a delicate wall.

Following these suggestions, even if one were to exhaust the topical words in the upper verse, I do not find it such a terrible prospect. Moreover, I know of skillful poets who could compose poetry without explicit reference to the topic, especially compound topics<sup>54</sup> of love. I am reminded of a poem by Lord Teika, the Kyogoku Middle Counselor, on the topic of “Love in which you plan to meet but never do”:

<i>iro kawaru</i>	Color changing
<i>Mino no nakayama</i>	Mino mountains,
<i>akikoete</i>	as autumn passes through,
<i>mata tohokazaru</i>	once again grow distant—
<i>afusaka no seki</i>	a barrier to meeting.

<sup>52</sup> *Shogakushō*, 初学抄, was written during the late Heian period (794–1185) by Fujiwara Kiyosuke (1104–1177), leader of the Rokujō school, rivals of the Mikohidari school. It was copied by Fujiwara Tameie.

<sup>53</sup> For *sanka unohana*, 山家卯花, see *Goshūishū* 171 [Later Collection of Gleanings; abbreviated as GSIS] (1086) for one extant example of a poem incorporating this topic.

<sup>54</sup> Two examples of *musubi dai*, 結題, are in this section: “mountain villa deutzias” (*sanka unohana*) and “love in which you plan to meet but never do” 遇不遇恋 (*ahite awazaru kohi*).

He composed many poems of this nature. If it were up to me in my ineptitude, I might have said,

<i>afute awazaru</i>	to meet but never meeting—
<i>koi zo kurushiki</i>	how painful is this love! <sup>55</sup>

#### IV. The Essence of a Topic and the Classical Tradition

Furthermore, I believe Lord Shunzei, Master of the Dowager Empress's Household Office, composed poems of this sort on the topic of Anticipated or Promised Love<sup>56</sup>:

<i>omohikiya</i> <sup>57</sup>	Did I ever think,
<i>shidji no hashigaki</i>	counting the nights on this shaft bench
<i>kakitsumete</i>	till finally we meet,
<i>momoyo mo onaji</i>	the hundredth would be no different:
<i>maronesen to wa</i> <sup>58</sup>	a restless night without you.

It tells the tale of a woman refusing to marry a man unless he visits for one-hundred nights and sleeps upon the shaft bench of his carriage. The man carved upon the wood, marking each visit until his vigil reached ninety-nine nights, but by the hundredth night an unexpected obstacle prevented him from visiting. Few have not heard of this tale, however, so I shall say no more.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> This couplet is not set off in the original text, but rather recorded as a quotation within the sentence. Abutsu finishes Teika's poem by explicitly stating the bound topic, thereby emphasizing Teika's skill in subtlety.

<sup>56</sup> 臨し期し約恋.

<sup>57</sup> The combination "*omohikiya...to wa*" is commonly used in poetry: KKS 961 and 970 are such examples.

<sup>58</sup> Found in SZS XII, 779 (Love 2:23) by Fujiwara Shunzei.

<sup>59</sup> *Yoru no tsuru* precedes the well-known adaptation of this legend, the Noh play *Kayoi Komachi* (*Komachi and the Hundred Nights*) by Kan'ami (1333–1384). *Kayoi Komachi* by Kanze Kiyotsugu Kan'ami is translated by Eileen Kato in *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*, Donald Keene, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, pp. 51–63.

Likewise, the poet by the name of Jakuren composed the following on the topic of triangular love<sup>60</sup>:

<i>tsu no kuni no</i>	If there is a bird
<i>Ikuta no kawa ni</i>	on the Ikuta River
<i>tori mo iba</i>	of Tsu Province, <sup>61</sup>
<i>mi wo kagiri to ya</i>	surely it would have decided
<i>omohi narinan</i>	the fate of my own life.

It alludes to the episode of the two suitors<sup>62</sup> in *Tales of Yamato*, so again I need not say more. As there are numerous examples where poems are composed coupled with contents of topics from the classics to achieve the essence of a given topic, it would be superfluous for me to rake together all such poems like seaweed<sup>63</sup> used for salt.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> 兩人を思ふ恋.

<sup>61</sup> Tsu is an abbreviation for Settsu Province, now Hyōgo prefecture.

<sup>62</sup> *Man'yōshū* [Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves; abbreviated as MYS] (ca 759). The origin of this tale of triangular love is the 9<sup>th</sup> century MYS IX: 1807 and 1808, known as the “Maiden of Unai.” Another version is in *Yamato monogatari* Section 147.

<sup>63</sup> The word *moshihogusa* puns on the homophonous *kaku*, “to write” or “to rake (seaweed)”. Nun Abutsu uses seaweed as a metaphor for poems and utilizes this imagery in *Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon* in a poem sent to Tamesuke: *waka no ura ni / kakitodometaru / moshihogusa / kore wo mukashi no / katami to mo mi yo* (“Make it a keepsake, a memento of the past—this briny seaweed raked together on the beach at Waka-no-ura”). Translation by Helen McCullough (1990), p. 343.

<sup>64</sup> In addition, Ariwara no Yukihiro paints a similar image during his exile to Suma, which also happens to be located in Tsu Province (KKS 962): *wakuraba ni / tou hito araba Suma no ura ni / moshiotaretsutsu / wabu to kotaeyo* (“If from time to time anyone should ask after me, answer them this: on Suma Bay with tear-drenched sleeves I gather seaweed salt”). Translation by Laurel Rodd (1984), p. 326. Suma Bay was known for its salt-makers. Salt imagery was also closely associated with shedding tears.

It brings to mind how [Minamoto no] Shitagō<sup>65</sup> conceived a *shih* on the topic of admiring the moon in the rain:

Yang Guifei<sup>66</sup> descends to the underworld;  
My thoughts like the yearning of the Tang emperor.<sup>67</sup>

The sentiment is tender and keenly curious. How can the unskilled possibly devise such an expression?

#### V. Composing from the Lower Verse to the Upper Verse

Furthermore, in composing a poem, needless to say one begins with the opening five syllables and follows gradually through the rest. If done correctly, there is no need to consult outside sources<sup>68</sup>. Should one find issue with this approach, I have constantly heard of an alternative technique to composition. This is what I have been told: “First, refine the two seven-syllable lines of the lower verse, then work from the second line of the upper verse, and finally use the opening five syllables to balance the upper and lower verse.” I consider this a precautionary measure in cases where composing from the upper verse onward results in a dull lower verse.<sup>69</sup>

#### VI. The Methods behind Allusive Variation

It is, furthermore, precisely the ability to quote earlier poems which distinguishes the skilled from the unskilled. Lord Teika has written

---

<sup>65</sup> Minamoto no Shitagō (911–983) was a Heian poet and one of the compilers of the *Gosenshū*. He is also believed to be the author of the 10<sup>th</sup> century narrative *Utsuho monogatari* (The Tale of the Hollow Tree).

<sup>66</sup> The verse alludes to the famous beauty of China Yang Guifei (Japanese Yōkihi), the beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong (685–762). Her story is told in the long poem by Bai Juyi (772–846) “The Song of Unending Sorrow,” which saw immense popularity in Heian Japan and became the inspiration for the beginning of *The Tale of Genji*.

<sup>67</sup> This excerpt is only the second half of the entire Chinese quatrain.

<sup>68</sup> That is, looking at poetry manuals or finding concrete examples.

<sup>69</sup> This strategy is especially useful when the poem’s phrase breaks are in a 5, 7/5, 7/7 pattern. This form of prosody is typical of the *Kokinshū* style onward.

extensively on this style of allusive variation for posterity.<sup>70</sup> But, my, how splendid it is to fashion a completely novel poem from the very same words and caesurae used in the foundation poem! Compare this poem by the poet known as the Daughter of Lord Shunzei,<sup>71</sup> which I believe is included in the *Shoku Gosen*:<sup>72</sup>

<p><i>sakeba chiru</i> <i>hana no ukiyo to</i></p> <p><i>omofu nimo</i> <i>naho utomarenu</i> <i>yamazakura kana</i></p>	<p>“Bloom only to scatter blossoms of this transient world,” even when I think thus, I have not the heart to deny the beauty of the mountain cherries.</p>
--	--

with this poem from *The Tale of Genji*:

<p><i>sode nururu</i> <i>tsuyu no yukari to</i> <i>omofu nimo</i> <i>naho utomarenu</i> <i>Yamato nadeshiko</i></p>	<p>“Dampening your sleeves, the spring of these dewdrops,” even when I think thus, I have not the heart to deny the beauty of the little pink.<sup>73</sup></p>
---	---

Given this is the work of one so skilled, the poem is considerably tasteful and without flaw even though the quoted phrases are unchanged. To emulate her skill is beyond reach. If I were to continue to write such things,

---

<sup>70</sup> Such works by Teika which discuss allusive variation (*honkadori*) include *Eiga taigai* (Essentials of Poetic Composition; c. 1216), *Kindai shūka* (Superior Poems of Our Time; c. 1209), and *Maigetsusho* (Monthly Notes; c. 1219).

<sup>71</sup> Shunzei Kyō no Musume (1171–1252) is technically his granddaughter, but she was adopted as his daughter. Nun Abutsu clearly thinks highly of a fellow female Mikohidari poet.

<sup>72</sup> *Shoku Gosenshū* [Later Collection Continued; abbreviated as *Shoku GSS*] (1251). The tenth royal anthology compiled by Fujiwara no Tameie, Nun Abutsu’s husband.

<sup>73</sup> Fujitsubo addresses this poem to Genji in “Momiji no ga” (Beneath the Autumn Leaves). The “little pink” (*nadeshiko*) is her newborn child (Tyler, *Tale of Genji*, p. 143).

my words would “outnumber the grains of sand upon Nagahama’s shore.”<sup>74</sup> For now, then, I shall write and attach here only what I can recall for certain while your messenger is here.<sup>75</sup>

### VII. Refraining from the Diction of the *Man’yōshū* and the Three Collections

Furthermore, this was once articulated to me: “It is not within good taste to incorporate old diction into inept compositions on the basis that such words were used by ancient poets of the *Man’yō*<sup>76</sup> and the Three Collections.”<sup>77</sup> Those from long ago who recited and listened to poetry have grown accustomed to elegant phrases, such as “*omohoyuru kana*,”<sup>78</sup> “*mono ni zarikeri*,”<sup>79</sup> “*kerashimo*,”<sup>80</sup> —or other tropes such as “*bemi*”<sup>81</sup> and

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous (KKS 1085): *kimi ga yo wa / kagiri mo araji / nagahama no / masago no kazu wa / yomitsukusu tomo* (“No number shall be put to the limitless years of my lord’s life—not even if we count each grain of sand on Nagahama”). Translation by Laurel Rodd (1984), p. 370.

<sup>75</sup> Yanase and Takei consider this a sudden break in Nun Abutsu’s didactic tone which reveals a more frank and intimate conversation with the “one whom it was difficult to refuse” (*sarigataki hito*).

<sup>76</sup> MYS: The oldest extant poetry collection; Ōtomo no Yakamochi (718–785) was the last compiler.

<sup>77</sup> Sandaishū refers collectively to the *Kokinshū*, *Gosenshū*, and the *Shūishū*—the first three royal anthologies.

<sup>78</sup> *Omohoyu* is a variation on *omofu* (to think; to recall) used to indicate spontaneity. *Kana* is an exclamatory final particle. Yanase and Takei count the frequency of this phrase in the aforementioned collections to emphasize its dated nature. MYS: 40 times; KKS (ca. 905): 5 times; *Gosenshū* [Later Collection; abbreviated as GSS] (951): 8 times; and *Shūishū* [Collection of Gleanings; abbreviated as SIS] (ca. 1005): 7 times. They also note that Teika does not use *omohoyuru kana* even once.

<sup>79</sup> *Mono ni zarikeri* comes from *mono ni zo ari keru*. In addition to the anthologies, the phrase is used at least twice in *Yamato monogatari* and at least once in *Kagerō nikki*.

<sup>80</sup> *Kerashimo* comes from the recollective auxiliary verb *keri* in the attributive form, the suppositional auxiliary verb *rashi*, and the exclamatory final particle *mo*.

<sup>81</sup> *Bemi* comes from the suppositional auxiliary verb *beshi* and the particle *mi* used to indicate reason.

“*omoheba mizu no.*” But as time goes by and the leaves of words of people change, the words of Hitomaro and Akahito, Mitsune and Tsurayuki<sup>82</sup> become far from comprehension, and therefore one must not acquire a proclivity for such diction when one composes.

### VIII. Refraining from Merely Copying Verses by Modern Poets

Likewise, I have also been told thus: “To compose by vying to steal entire verses of signature compositions by modern poets from the time of the *Senzai*<sup>83</sup> and the *Shinkokin*,<sup>84</sup> is quite undignified. Doing so would not even enhance the reputation of the original poet. One must exercise great caution in abstaining from such action.”

A poem with the phrase “dew-dropped letter,” written by a court lady of our time,<sup>85</sup> comes to mind. Since Lord Shunzei first established this phrase in his composition, someone once commented to me, “How I wish his composition remained untarnished”:

<i>iku aki kakitsu</i>	how many autumns have passed
<i>tsuyu no tamadzusa</i>	writing these dew-dropped letters? <sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> The works of Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (c. 662–710) and Yamabe no Akahito (fl. 724–736) are representative of the *Man'yōshū*. Ōshikōchi no Mitsune (859–925) and Ki no Tsurayuki (872–945) were compilers of the *Kokinshū*. All four of these men are members of the Thirty-six Poetic Immortals.

<sup>83</sup> SZS (1187): The seventh royal anthology compiled by Shunzei. The time of this anthology marks the beginning of what Nun Abutsu and her contemporaries considered “modern” poetry during the medieval period.

<sup>84</sup> *Shinkokinshū* [New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern; abbreviated as SKKS] (1205): The eighth royal anthology compiled by Teika, Fujiwara Ariie, Fujiwara Ietaka, Priest Jakuren, Minamoto Michitomo. The *Shinkokinshū* along with the *Kokinshū* represent the greatest achievements of classical Japanese poetry.

<sup>85</sup> Daigo Lay Priest Former Chancellor Yoshihira no Musume was known as Ōmiya-in no Nyōbō. In 1274 (Bun'ei 10.7.7) she submitted seven poems to the royal palace. Her poem is found in *Shoku* (SIS 566) and the Hundred Sequence of the Hōji Era (*Hōji hyakushu*).

<sup>86</sup> Taken from SKKS 320: *Tanabata no / to wataru fune no / kadji no ha ni / iku aki kakitsu / tsuyu no tamadzusa* (“The rudder of a crossing boat at

I can say that the poem is no doubt old by now. However, it is undeniably and unforgivably ill-mannered to take from new poems which we have before us. “When composing a poem, one must thoroughly consider its topical essence and delicately weave your words together,” he said. If you speak heedless of thought, imitate the work of others, or conceive verses which amount to only frivolous leaves of words, then you renounce the styles of grammar and fail to balance a poem’s beginning with its end. How much more of these poems can one stand to write?

### **IX. The Fluidity and Constancy of Japanese Poetry**

Furthermore, even the form of each and every poem is subject to the flow of time from generation to generation. Many say, “When one compares the poems of old to the poems of today, they are like fire and water.”<sup>87</sup> However, even among the poems of those from recent times and from the middle period<sup>88</sup> is one certain to find poems which are not distinctly inferior to ones of the past.

Likewise, those regarded as skillful poets are partial to poems of old, the essence and diction of which are elegant, never outdated no matter the age, and sophisticatedly intriguing. Hence, it is to be expected that little has changed from past to present.

### **X. Writing Poems and Buddhism**

As for what I have learned in the Way of the Buddha, the life of no one person is predestined for either sin or virtue. Once one finds devotion, one can achieve spiritual awakening through a life of seclusion. One may encounter difficulties meeting the right priest for guidance at a crucial moment in one’s life. One may find oneself at a loss searching for this guide,

---

Tanabata—how many autumns have passed writing these dew-dropped letters on mulberry leaves?”). *Kadji* is a pivot as it puns on the homophonous words for “rudder” and “mulberry.” Shunzei’s poem is an allusive variation on GSIS 242 by the Wet Nurse of Kazusa: *Ama no kawa / to wataru fune no / kadji no ha ni / omofu koto wo mo / kaki tsukuru kana* (“The rudder of a boat crossing the River of Heaven—how I have written in full my thoughts on mulberry leaves.”)

<sup>87</sup> This “fire and water” analogy is used in commentary in the *Poetry Contest in Six-Hundred Rounds (Ropyakuban utaawase)*, p. 1193).

<sup>88</sup> This period is approximately Mid to Late Heian Period, or, more importantly, the time of the *Kokinshū*.

yet Buddhist Law provides guidance in the form of sacred sutras which still remain in this world.

As for guidance in poetry, so too do the *Man'yō* and the *Kokin* still remain. When one is spiritually awakened and enters an ascetic life, how can one fail to achieve Supreme Buddhahood at the end of the Buddhist Law<sup>89</sup> and the Five Impurities?<sup>90</sup> This will surely depend on whether one's heart is devoted to the Way of the Buddha or the Way of Poetry. One's rank in society matters not in the upholding of the Law and the preservation of the Way of Poetry.

### XI. Composing Poetry: Feelings

First, those who wish to compose poetry must touch upon matters and place feelings above all: knowing the pathos of things,<sup>91</sup> always calming one's mind—scattering blossoms and leaves falling, changing seasonal dew and showers—aligning one's eyes and heart to all these; one must ready one's self throughout the day to moments worthy of composing poetry.

### XII. Composing Poetry: Fiction

Furthermore, “When it comes to poems on the four seasons, fiction is in poor taste. Rather one must compose by delicately handling the subject just as it is. As for poems on love, though many are clever and fictitious, these are not purposefully unpleasant. They are intended to express a sense of poignancy, as in ‘Though there is an ocean beneath my pillow,’<sup>92</sup> or ‘My

<sup>89</sup> The age of decline refers to *Mappō*, the Buddhist age of the degeneration of Dharma. *Mappō* was a matter of serious concern for people during Nun Abutsu's time.

<sup>90</sup> The Five Impurities are (1) The impurity of the age (2) the impurity of desire (3) impurity of living beings (4) impurity of thought, and (5) impurity of the life span.

<sup>91</sup> *Mono no aware* is the Japanese principle which emphasizes an awareness to the impermanence of all things. *The Tale of Genji* is the quintessential piece of literature representing this concept.

<sup>92</sup> Used in KKS 595 by Ki no Tomonori: *shikitaē no / makura no shita ni / umi wa aredo / hito wo mirume wa / oizu zo arikeru* (“Beneath my finely woven pillow an ocean of tears is found, yet we have no chance to meet, no seaweed grows in these waters.”). Translation by Laurel R. Rodd. *Shikitaē no* (finely woven) is a *makura kotoba* for *makura* (pillow). *Mirume* is a pun which can mean both “seaweed” and “chance to meet.” Describing one's

chest is Fuji, my sleeves the Kiyomi Barrier.<sup>93</sup> No matter the expression, one will find that these poems are wholly different from poems on the four seasons.” So I was told.

He continues, likewise, “Even in poems on the four seasons are fictitious elements acceptable depending on the style. Consider first Archbishop Henjō<sup>94</sup> who writes:

<i>tama ni mo nukeru</i>	strung together like jewels
<i>haru no yanagi ka</i>	on willow branches of spring. <sup>95</sup>

or another poem which distorts the truth:

[ <i>asaborake</i> ]	[In the light of day] <sup>96</sup>
<i>ariake no tsuki to</i>	seeing them as if they shine
<i>miru made ni</i>	like dawn’s moon:
<i>Yoshino no sato ni</i>	the fallen white snow
<i>fururu shirayuki</i>	in the village of Yoshino. <sup>97</sup>

---

tears at night as an ocean beneath one’s pillow is an example of the *soragoto* (“lies” or “impossible things”; fiction) elements which Nun Abutsu discusses.<sup>93</sup> Used in *Shikashū* 212 [Collection of Verbal Flowers; abbreviated as SKS] (ca. 1151–1154) by Taira no Suketaka: *mune wa Fuji / sode wa Kiyomi ga seki / nareyakeburi mo / name mo tatanuma zo naki*. Another example of *soragoto* in which one’s love burns like the active Mt. Fuji at one moment and is turbulent like the waves at Kiyomi the next.

<sup>94</sup> Henjō (816–890) was originally known as Yoshimine no Munesada. He was a grandson of Emperor Kanmu who began his career as a courtier, but took Buddhist vows at the death of Emperor Ninmyō.

<sup>95</sup> The lower verse of KKS 27 by Archbishop Henjō: *asamidori / ito yorikakete / shiratsuyu wo / tama ni mo nukeru / haru no yanagi ka* (“Along slender threads of delicate twisted greens translucent dewdrops strung as small fragile jewels—new willow webs in spring.”). Translation by Laurel R. Rodd.

<sup>96</sup> The opening lines of this poem and the following poem have been provided in brackets since they are omitted in the original text.

<sup>97</sup> KKS 332 by Sakanoue no Korenori (fl. early Heian period).

or poems where blossoms are mistaken for clouds<sup>98</sup>—these are permissible. One must weigh with great caution the idea that one must not compose on what is not true.”

### XIII. The Essence of a Topic Revisited: Expressions

Furthermore, when handling the topic of the old capital, the convention appears to be to speak of nothing but “the former capital.” However, I have been told that when the notion of the old capital is mentioned in even a typical poem<sup>99</sup>, “I wish to mention in particular places whose names have grown old, as in the Nara Capital<sup>100</sup>, the Naniwa Capital<sup>101</sup>, and the Shiga Capital<sup>102</sup>.”

Likewise, when it comes to the topics of “Love before the moon” and “Love when the moon is near,” how disappointing it is when everyone simply treats the two topics the same, unable to tell one from the other. As for “Love when the moon is near,” if one uses just the word “moon,” then one has no doubt approached the topic. When one’s words become verses such as this, then one has appropriately reached the topic:

<i>[tsuki nomi wa]</i>	[This moon alone]
<i>uwa no sora naru</i>	high above the skies beams as
<i>katami nite</i>	a memento of you—
<i>omohi mo ideba</i>	would that you remember, too,

<sup>98</sup> Many poems of this kind exist. For example, KKS 59 by Ki no Tsurayuki: *sakurabana / sakinikerashi na / ashihiki no / yama no kai yori / miyuru shirakumo* (“Now it seems that the cherry blossoms have burst forth at last, from here I see white clouds floating between the rugged far-off mountain slopes.”). Translation by Laurel R. Rodd.

<sup>99</sup> I.e. a poem which does not have *furusato* as its assigned topic.

<sup>100</sup> Nara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 794. KKS 90 by the Nara Mikado is an example which includes both *furusato* and *Nara no miyako*: *furusato to / narinishi nara no / miyako ni mo / iro wa kawarazu / hana wa sakikeri* (“Nara, the ancient capital, now deserted by the throngs of old only the blossoms visit, their loveliness unchanged.”). Translation by Laurel R. Rodd.

<sup>101</sup> Naniwa was the capital during the reign of Emperor Nintoku (313–399). The capital is mentioned four times in MYS.

<sup>102</sup> Shiga was the capital during the reign of Emperor Tenji (626–672).

*kokoro kayowan*                      could my heart find its way.<sup>103</sup>

As for “Love before the moon,” one must be facing the moon when composing on the topic. I believe Lord Shunzei had once composed a poem on the topic of “Love before the moon”:

*koishisa no*                      As the yearning in me  
*munashiki sora ni*                spills forth and fills to the brim  
*michinureba*                    the empty night sky,  
*tsuki mo kokoro no*              even the moon seeks refuge  
*uchi ni koso sume*                within the depths of myheart.<sup>104</sup>

Moreover, amateur poets are ever partial to using phrases such as “Oh, how pleased I am!” or “Oh, how sad I am!” I remember being told that “Unless one is experiencing something truly pleasing or saddening, do not compose in such a way.”

#### XIV. A History of Expressions from Royal Anthologies across the Ages

This is what has been passed on to me: “As for model poems, one must remember well the poems from the *Kokin*<sup>105</sup> and use them as foundations for allusive variation.

“Although it is all the same for the Three Collections, within the *Gosen*<sup>106</sup> one finds a number of elegant poems mixed at the same time with a number of discordant ones. One wonders then if the Five Men of the Pear Pavilion<sup>107</sup> had different preferences.

---

<sup>103</sup> SKKS 1267 by Priest Saigyō (1118–1190), famous poet of late Heian and early Kamakura periods.

<sup>104</sup> Found in Shunzei’s personal collection *Chōshū eisō*. Shunzei started the compilation in 1178 and it was completed by Teika in 1229. The poem can also be found in *Shinchokusenshū* 964 [New Imperial Collection; abbreviated as SCSS] (1234).

<sup>105</sup> KKS (ca. 905): The first royal anthology with Ki no Tsurayuki as the principal compiler.

<sup>106</sup> GSS (951): The second royal anthology ordered by Emperor Murakami.

<sup>107</sup> The five compilers of the *Gosenshū*: Ōnakatomi no Yoshinobu (921–991), Minamoto no Shitagō (911–983), Kiyowara no Motosuke (908–990; the father of Sei Shōnagon, author of *The Pillow Book*), Sakanoue no Mochiki (fl. ca. 10<sup>th</sup> century), and Ki no Tokibumi (922–996).

“As for the *Shūi*,<sup>108</sup> everyone seems to choose from the *Draft of Shūishū*<sup>109</sup> for good poems.”

Likewise, regarding the *Goshūi*<sup>110</sup>—a time which saw many skillful poets—although there are truly interesting poems, I believe there are various criticisms of it in *Reprimand of the Goshūi*,<sup>111</sup> starting with poems such as one with the phrase “bursting into bud at water’s edge.”<sup>112</sup>

As for the *Kin’yō*<sup>113</sup> and the *Shika*,<sup>114</sup> the form of poetry changed with many having borrowed individual verses and a tendency towards humor. One can see in the collections to follow the individual tastes of the compilers, which are difficult to ignore.

He continues: “As for the *Shinkokin*, the form of poetry returned to the elegance of the past, and even though expressions such as ‘the dewdrop certain to fall from the plucked bush clover or soft hail about to melt when gathered upon the precious bamboo grass’<sup>115</sup> remained the convention, formalities were broken and the style of poetry changed once more, perhaps

---

<sup>108</sup> SIS (ca. 1005): The third royal anthology compiled by Fujiwara no Kintō with revisions and expansions by Emperor Kazan.

<sup>109</sup> *Shūishō* (996–999; *Draft of Shūishū*): an anthology in ten books compiled by Fujiwara no Kintō which served as the basis for the *Shūishū*.

<sup>110</sup> GSIS (1086): The fourth royal anthology compiled by Fujiwara no Michitoshi (1047–1099).

<sup>111</sup> *Nan Goshūi* was written by Minamoto Tsunenobu (1016–1097).

<sup>112</sup> GSIS 9 by Ōnakatomi no Yoshinobu.

<sup>113</sup> *Kin’yōshū* [Collection of Golden Leaves; abbreviated as KYS] (1127): The fifth royal anthology compiled by Minamoto no Shunrai (1057–1129).

<sup>114</sup> SKS (ca. 1151–1154): The sixth royal anthology compiled by Fujiwara no Akisuke (1090–1155).

<sup>115</sup> The phrases are an allusion to similes made by the Chief Equerry in “Hahakigi” (The Broom Tree) from *The Tale of Genji*. Royall Tyler explains that the expressions “evoke a young woman ready at a touch to swoon in a suitor’s arms...the poetic *hagi*, whose long, drooping fronds bloom deep pink, violet or white in autumn; while the *tamazasa* [is] a species of ‘dwarf bamboo’” (31). He also notes that the mention of *hagi* refers to KKS 223: *orite miba / ochi zo shinubeki / akihagi no / eda mo tawawa ni / okeru shiratsuyu* (“If I tried to pluck the branches on which they rest, they would fall to earth—the boughs of bush clover bend under this load of dewdrops.”). Translation by Laurel Rodd.

to a fault. As for the *Shinchokusen*,<sup>116</sup> the compilers chose poems which they thought expressed reality.”

Afterwards came the time of the *Shoku Gosen* when we enjoyed an era of the Way<sup>117</sup> restored,<sup>118</sup> which the Tokiwai Chancellor<sup>119</sup> started and the Kinugasa Palace Minister<sup>120</sup> and Nobuzane<sup>121</sup> upheld, while Tomoie<sup>122</sup> and countless more kept the unending traditions of the household. Since it became a collection blessed by the union of sovereign and subject,<sup>123</sup> one can no doubt see its value. But since there are poets who keep with the times as well as those who would tilt their heads in demur, I wonder what may happen hereafter.<sup>124</sup> The future is beyond my comprehension, and so my view ends here.

---

<sup>116</sup> SCSS (1234): The ninth royal anthology compiled by Fujiwara Teika.

<sup>117</sup> The Way of Poetry.

<sup>118</sup> Praise for the reign of Emperor Go-Saga who commissioned the compilation of the aforementioned *Shoku Gosenshū*. Such praise was typically found in the prefaces to royal anthologies.

<sup>119</sup> Saionji no Saneuji (1194–1269) was the father of Ōmiya-in, mother of Emperor Go-Fukakusa. The title of Chancellor was the highest possible office in the Ministers of State.

<sup>120</sup> Kujō no Ieyoshi (1192–1264) was one of the five compilers of the *Shoku Kokinshū* (1265) on Go-Saga’s order of 1259.

<sup>121</sup> Fujiwara no Nobuzane (1176–1265) was a painter and the son of Takanobu, the half-brother of Teika. He was known for painting the Thirty-six Immortal Poets.

<sup>122</sup> Fujiwara (Rokujō) no Tomoie (1182–1258) was the grandson of Fujiwara Shigeie and uncle of Ariie, who was one of the Thirty-six Immortal Poets. Tomoie was the governor of Mimasaka at Junior Third Rank at 1229 and took the priestly name Rensei after taking tonsure in 1238.

<sup>123</sup> The phrase is an allusion to the preface of the *Kokinshū*: “In that era the sovereign must truly have appreciated poetry, and during his reign Kakinomoto no Hitomaro of the Senior Third Rank was a sage of poetry. Thus ruler and subjects must have been one.” Translation by Laurel Rodd, pp. 41–42.

<sup>124</sup> Nun Abutsu could be questioning in particular the upcoming compilation of the *Shoku Shūishu*.

**XV. Ancient Poets**

One must examine thoroughly the majestic and elegant poems of poets who have gained prominence in collections from generation to generation, from past till present. Additionally, one must discern each poem's topical essence when appropriate and make an effort to emulate works of past genius should one come across them. As for poems by those in our time, perish the thought of taking a liking to them.

**XVI. The Impromptu Compositions of Ancient Poets**

Furthermore, a poem composed swiftly in response to an unexpected matter in the moment exceeds any willful composition, as long as one says what one wants to say at the time and follows through with the style. Consider Koshikibu no Naishi,<sup>125</sup> who restrained the Middle Counselor [Fujiwara no] Sadayori<sup>126</sup> and replied:

<i>mada fumi mo mizu</i>	I have yet to set foot on
<i>Ama no hashidate</i>	the Bridge of Heaven <sup>127</sup>

or the wit of Suō no Naishi<sup>128</sup> in her response to the Middle Counselor [Fujiwara no] Tadaie<sup>129</sup>:

---

<sup>125</sup> Koshikibu no Naishi (999–1025) was the daughter of the poet Izumi Shikibu (b. 976) and served under Empress Shōshi.

<sup>126</sup> Fujiwara no Sadayori (995–1045) was the eldest son of Fujiwara no Kintō and an active poet.

<sup>127</sup> The lower verse is taken from KYS 586 and can also be found in *Hyakunin Isshu: Ōe yama / Ikuno michi no / tōkereba / mada fumi mo mizu / Ama no hashidate* (“Since the path to Mount Ōe and Ikuno is far away, I have yet to set foot on the Bridge of Heaven.”). The KYS headnote to this poem explains that Fujiwara Sadayori teases Koshikibu no Naishi by insinuating she must depend on her mother—who was at the time in Tango province—to compose a poem for an upcoming poetry contest. Her quick-witted response incorporates three place names associated with Tango. *Fumi mo mizu* puns on the homophonous phrases “yet to step on” and “yet to see a letter.”

<sup>128</sup> Suō no Naishi (1037–1109) was the daughter of Taira no Munenaka and served during the reign of Go-Reizei.

<sup>129</sup> Fujiwara no Tadaie (1033–1091) was the grandson of Fujiwara no Michinaga and the grandfather of Fujiwara Shunzei. He actually reached the office of Major Counselor in his lifetime.

*kainaku tatan*                      How regretful it would be  
*na koso oshikere*                should rumors rise in vain<sup>130</sup>

This shows that the human intellect can take form simply through experience soaked by the brine of the Way of Poetry, which therefore means that what was true in the past can be true in the present. Although I am now but a rotting tree in a valley, long forgotten, how could I not be able to swiftly exchange poems with such men of refinement? In truth, I feel envious of these women from those times.

### Postscript

Written by my late father around the time of Imagawa Nobumochi.<sup>131</sup> I have perused this writing since my childhood.  
 Acting Middle Counselor (signature).

---

<sup>130</sup> The lower verse is taken from SZS 961 and can also be found in *Hyakunin Isshu: haru no yo no / bakari naru / tamakura ni / kainaku tatan na koso oshikere* (“To only become a spring night’s dream, your arm for a pillow—how regretful it would be should rumors rise in vain?”). The SZS headnote to this poem describes how Fujiwara Tadaie slips his arm under the curtains, offering it as a pillow for an exhausted Suō no Naishi. *Kaina* acts a pivot as it puns on the homophones “arm” and “in vain.”

<sup>131</sup> The characters for Imagawa 今河 might refer to the Imagawa clan 今川氏, who were descendants of the Seiwa Genji. Kira Kuniuji, son of Kira Nagauji, and grandson of Ashikaga Yoshikane, took the name Imagawa when he took possession of the Imagawa Villa in Hantō in Mikawa Province (present day Aichen-ken). The Imagawa were *shugo* (stewards) of the Suruga province and produced a succession of literary folk.

## Works Cited

- Brower, Robert H. "Fujiwara Teika's *Maigetsushō*." *Monumenta Nipponica* 40/4 (1985).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Foremost Style of Poetic Composition: Fujiwara Tameie's *Eiga no ittei*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 36/4 (1987).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Reizei Family Documents," *Monumenta Nipponica* 36/4 (1981).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Japanese Court Poetry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1988. Print.
- Carter, Steven D. *Waiting for the Wind: Thirty-Six Poets of Japan's Late Medieval Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Hosoya Naoki. *Chūsei karon no kenkyū*. Kasama shoin, 1976.
- Hulvey, S. Yumiko. "Abutsu-ni" in *Japanese Women Writers: A Biocritical Sourcebook*. Ed. Chieko I. Mulhern. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994. 3–7.
- Huey, Robert. *The Making of Shinkokinshū*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002.
- Iketa Kazuko. "Kajin Abutsu-ni." *Chūō daigaku kokubun* 13 (1970).
- International Research Center for Japanese Studies. *Waka dētabēsu*, Waka gokukensaku, January 2002 (accessed December 2, 2014, <http://tois.nichibun.ac.jp/database/html2/waka/menu.html>).
- Iwasa Miyoko, ed. *Gyokuyō wakashū zenchūshaku*. Vol. 3. Kasama shoin, 1996.
- Keene, Donald, ed. *Twenty Plays of the Nō Theatre*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.
- Konishi Jin'ichi. *A History of Japanese Literature: The High Middle Ages*. Trans. Aileen Gatten. Vol. 3. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1991.
- Laffin, Christina. *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2013.
- McCullough, Hellen Craig. *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Morimoto Motoko. *Izayoi nikki, Yoru no tsuru zenchūshaku*. Tokyo, Kōdansha: 1966.
- Onodera Shō. "Yoru no tsuru ni miru Abutsu-ni no karon no kōsatsu." *Kokugo kokubun* 8 (1971).
- Ōbushi Harumi. "Yoru no tsuru no karon toshite no kōsatsu." *Kaishaku* 27 (1981).

- Ratcliff, Christian D. "Telling Secrets: *Mumyōzōshi*, Abutsu, and the Transmission of Literary Expertise by Women." *Jinbun kenkyū: Kanagawa daigaku jinbun gakkai shi* (2009).
- Reizei Shiguretei Bunko, July 8, 2014 (accessed December 3, 2014, <http://reizeike.jp/>).
- Rodd, Laurel R. *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Satō Hiroaki, ed. *Japanese Women Poets: An Anthology*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007.
- Shirane Haruo. *Classical Japanese: A Grammar*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.
- Stevenson, Barbara, and Cynthia Ho, ed. *Crossing the Bridge: Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.
- Tabuchi Kumiko. *Abutsu-ni*. Jinbutsu sōsho 261. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2009.
- Tyler, Royall, trans. *The Tale of Genji*. New York: Penguin, 2001.
- Wallace, John R. "Abutsu-ni" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Vol. 203 Medieval Japanese Writers*. Ed. Steven D. Carter. Detroit: The Gale Group, 1999. 3–9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Fitful Slumbers: Nun Abutsu's *Utatane*." *Monumenta Nipponica* 43/4 (1988).
- Yanase, ed. *Abutsu-ni zenshū*. Kazama shobō, 1984.
- Yanase Kazuo and Takei Kazuto, eds. *Izayoi nikki, Yoru no tsuru chūshaku*. Osaka: Izumi Shoin, 1986.

