

Japan in the Age of Modernization

THE ARTS OF ÔTAGAKI RENGETSU AND TOMIOKA TESSAI

EDITED BY
FRANK
FELTENS



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Ōtagaki Rengetsu's *Waka* Poetics

SENTIMENT, SELFHOOD, AND THE SAIGYŌ PERSONA

ŌTAGAKI RENGETSU (1791–1875) left behind nearly one thousand *waka* poems—a number multiplied by their repeated inscription on all manner of surfaces, from pottery to poem sheets to hanging scrolls with accompanying paintings. This vast body of poetic work speaks to Rengetsu's use of the ancient thirty-one syllable form as her primary mode of creative expression and intellectual ordering of experience. The vitality and social immediacy of the nun's poetry open up onto a vibrant world of *waka* and its theorization in the Edo period, countering notions of *waka*'s stagnation since the medieval period, when it gave way to forms such as linked verses (*renga*) and subsequently *haikai* in the early modern era. Although Rengetsu left no poetic treatises or theoretical texts of her own, her oeuvre of verses and inscribed artworks in their copious totality amount to a *waka* poetics of practice that rewards analysis for its richness and complexity of allusion, subject position, and medium specificity. In light of Paul Berry's historically detailed and insightful account of life and work in this volume, this essay assumes a level of familiarity with the nun's biography and output.¹ It offers a sustained meditation on Rengetsu's poetics, focusing on one of her most famous poems—instantiated in word and image—to demonstrate the multiplicity of poetic subject positions she employs. I argue that Rengetsu's work is imbricated with past poetic personae in a way that ultimately allows her to posit a self that is rhetorically negated.

Rengetsu practiced her poetry at the end of an age that had witnessed the transformation of *waka* as a form that drew from a limited set of elevated (*ga*) themes and a courtly poetic lexicon to one suffused with the language of the everyday, the plebian (*zoku*), and the personal. By the nineteenth century, the most notable *waka* theorists and their thousands of students had long debated the degree and manner in which high and low should be worked into this classical form. The stakes of these debates ranged in gravity, from individuals who associated the preservation of classical *waka* diction with existential and even cosmological concerns to those who focused on the aesthetic rewards of opening up the rarefied world of *waka* to a more egalitarian approach.² Within this history, Rengetsu's work is most closely aligned with efforts

to infuse *waka* with the external reality experienced by the poet, or what Roger K. Thomas has called “personalism.”³ This approach was favored in part by followers of the *waka* theorist Ozawa Roan (1723–1801), whose poetic treatises and personal writings Rengetsu encountered in 1851 at the age of sixty-one.⁴ In a subsequent letter to the “national learning” (*kokugaku*) scholar Murakami Tadamasa (1812–1884), Rengetsu signaled her aesthetic preferences and affinity for Roan’s approach, lauding him for having composed *waka* “from the heart, just as they occurred to him.”⁵

Rengetsu’s poetic oeuvre, produced over the course of her fifty-some years of artistic activity, is extensive and varied and, importantly, situational.⁶ Although some of her poems are less concerned with the kinds of poetic principles and ideas advanced by Roan, many warrant further analysis for how they engage the poetic theories to which she was exposed. Most discussion of Rengetsu’s poetry, for example, stops at praising its simplicity and directness, qualities that make her work seem easily accessible to readers across time. These are certainly important characteristics of her verse, but her approach to directness might be better understood as deriving from a desire to cultivate “plainspoken verse,” what Roan called *tadagoto uta*. This was not a mere incorporation of vernacular language into *waka* but was the result of learning to “refine the ordinary” through careful usage.⁷ Part of this process involved a continued dialogue with classical *waka* that would result in a communal understanding of the poetic past and what were perceived to be universal emotions, infusing one’s verse with “shared sentiment” (*dōjō*). Roan made it clear that one should not rely on the classical lexicon and imagery in a way that stifles the perspective of the poet or that results in purely imitative verse. He stressed the importance of “new sentiment” (*shinjō*) and the idea that individuals possess a singular perspective and grasp of language shaped by the constant state of flux in the world around them, which should be reflected in *waka*. I would suggest that many of Rengetsu’s poems not only reflect but actively engage these principles and even transform them through, for example, the particular Buddhist aesthetics that characterize her poetry.

In some cases, Rengetsu achieved an innovative “new sentiment” by registering a personal response to a recent event while tapping into traditional, affective poetic imagery. Take, for example, her verse among the *Three Waka Poems* in the Cowles Collection reacting to the Boshin War (1868–1869, specifically the 1868 Battle of Toba-Fushimi in which supporters of the Tokugawa shogunate fought pro-imperial forces) (Figure 1).

“As soldiers engage at Fushimi and the terrifying echoes of firearms traverse the distance”⁸

伏見にいくさありとて火具の音のいみしう響き渡りかかれば

Sounding incessantly from afar
these violent
winds of the moment—
how I wish they would not scatter
the blossoms of the Flowered Capital!

よそにきく
音もはげしき
時津風
花のみやこを
ちらさずもがな⁹

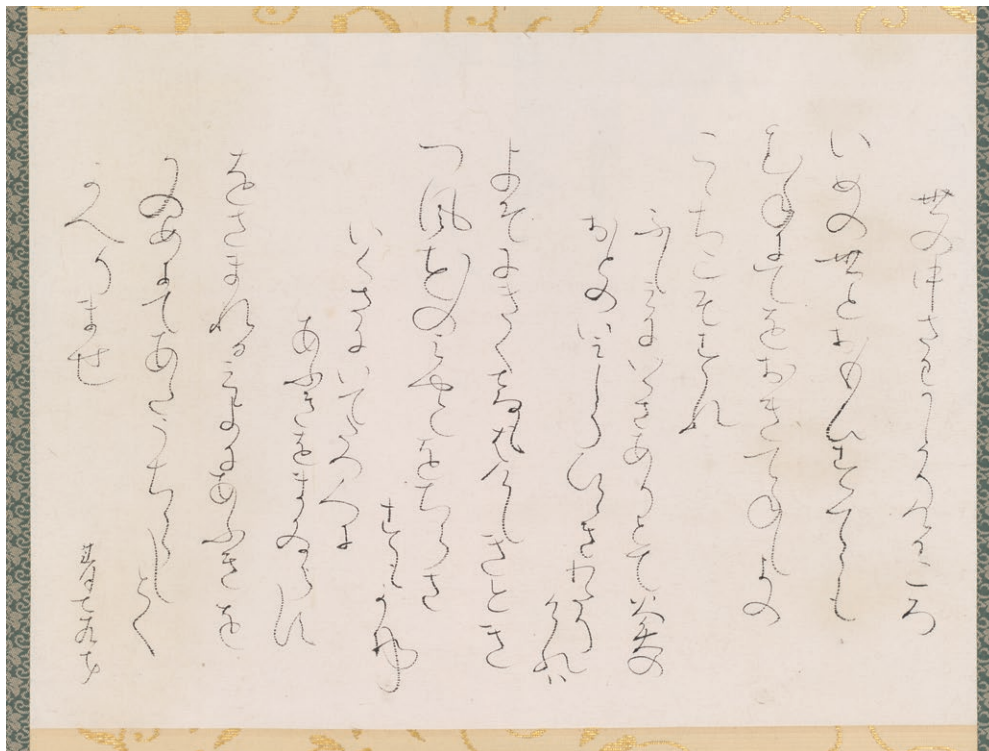
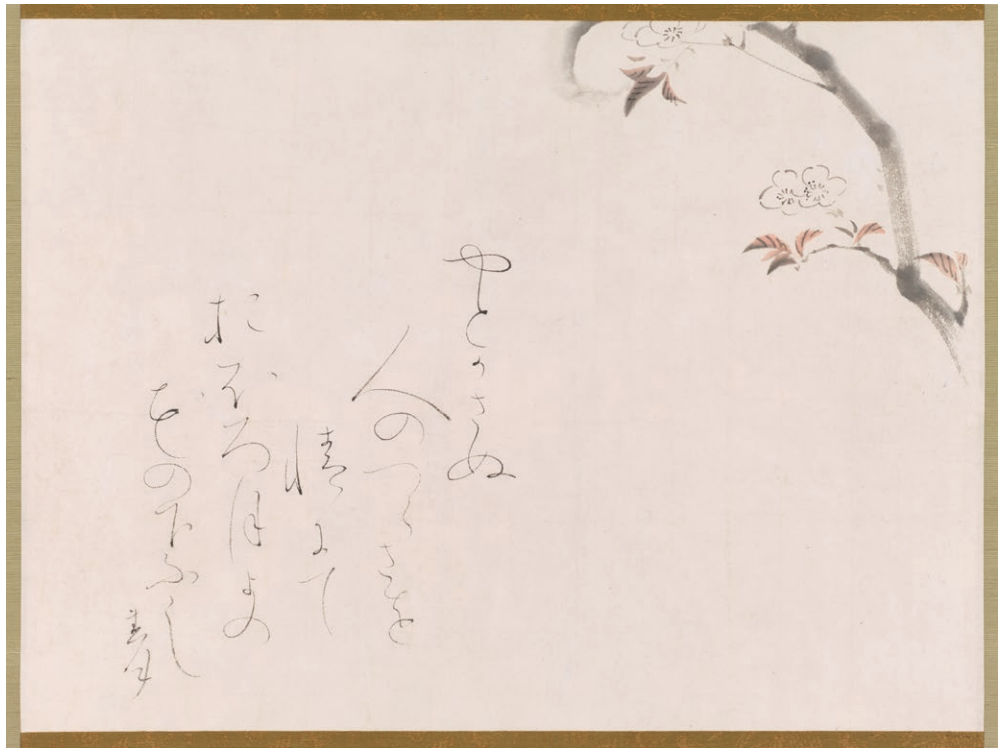


Figure 1. Ōtagaki Rengetsu, *Three Waka Poems*, 1869. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: The Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection, Gift of Mary and Cheney Cowles, F2021.2.2a-d.

Rengetsu heightens the poem’s immediacy by placing the reader on site with her in the heart of the capital, hearing the violent sounds of cannons and gunfire. Although the battlefield in Fushimi lies approximately ten kilometers to the south, the sonic image compresses space and topographical distance. Instead of age-old auditory poetic tropes such as the sound of the wind in the pines, it is the reverberating cacophony of gunfire that reaches her ears. It was in fact the new influx of massive numbers of firearms in this battle that enabled the pro-imperial forces to ultimately defeat the shogunate. Here the firearms are made explicit only in the poem’s headnote. In the *waka* proper, weaponry is only implied by the quality of its ferocious sound, allowing the verse to remain subtly evocative.

Yet the topic of gunfire represents a bold departure from orthodox *waka* and signals Rengetsu’s confidence in interpreting and deploying “new sentiment” in her work. She seems to announce this innovation by pivoting her poem on the word for “tidal wind” (*tokitsukaze*), which also refers to the rising tides of the political and social kind that were new to her age. She turns the poem into a lament over the present-day state of affairs in which supporters of the shogunate would take up arms against an imperial army. The poem is not all newness, however, and the final two lines use the classical image of the “Flowered Capital”—the epitome of courtly elegance (*miyabi*) and the epicenter of *waka* tradition—to create a stark juxtaposition to the sounds of fighting in the upper stanza. Taking the capital as a metaphor for the imperial body, the suggestion in the poem of its dissolution is startling. Yet this image is tempered by envisioning destruction in the classical terms of scattered

Figure 2. Ōtagaki Rengetsu, *Cherry Blossoms* / “No Place at the Inn,” nineteenth century. Hanging scroll; ink and light color on paper. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: The Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection, Gift of Mary and Cheney Cowles, F2019.3.26a-d.



evanescent blossoms, a key motif in Rengetsu’s Buddhist aesthetics of spirituality and impermanence.

Focusing exclusively on the immediacy or autobiographical aspects of Rengetsu’s poetry can have the effect of obscuring the intertextuality of her work. Her deep reservoir of poetic knowledge and the way she transforms the classical past provide ways of more fully understanding her artistic accomplishment. In the remainder of this essay, a close look at Rengetsu’s most famous verse will suggest the interpretive possibilities that arise from paying attention to her *waka* sources, even when the author’s subjective voice and presence in the poem seem to dominate. The poem in question is one that Rengetsu inscribed countless times on all manner of surfaces, from ceramics to poem strips (*tanzaku*) and poem sheets (*shikishi*) to vertically and horizontally oriented hanging scrolls, often accompanied by her own painting (Figure 2) or that of a collaborator, such as Wada Gozan (1800–1870).¹⁰ A particularly intriguing example is a collaboration between Rengetsu and Tomioka Tessai (1836–1924), dated to 1873 (Figure 3). The verse had already been published in Rengetsu’s poetry anthology *A Diver’s Harvested Seaweed* (*Ama no karumo*) a few years before she brushed this work at the age of eighty-three.

Turned away at the inn
I take this unkindness as grace...
resting instead
beneath the hazy moon
and evening blossoms.

やどかさぬ
人のつらさを
情にて
おぼろ月よの
花の下ぶし¹¹



Figure 3. Calligraphy:
Ōtagaki Rengetsu; Painting:
Tomioka Tessai, "No place
at the inn" Waka and Paint-
ing of Cherry Blossoms, 1873.
Hanging scroll; ink and light
color on paper. The Mary and
Cheney Cowles Collection.

Composed from the perspective of a traveler who has been denied shelter, the upper stanza, consisting of its first two lines (*kami no ku*), introduces the poem's topic—the “callousness” (*tsurasa*) of a “person who does not lend their lodging” (*yado kasanu hito*). In the lower stanza (*shimo no ku*), the uncharitable act of the innkeeper is transformed through the sentiment of the poet who, upon seeing the luminous vision of cherry blossoms bathed in hazy moonlight, decides to interpret it as a gift (*nasake nite*). The verse presents a poet who is spiritually and aesthetically cultivated enough to realize in the moonlit scene “the moving power of things” (*mono no aware*). It evokes the “ah-moment” of surprise that precedes a heart being moved, which is then captured in the unique diction of *waka* and which the nativist scholar and philologist Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) defined as the highest ideal of literary creation.¹² The poem's universality led to its extreme popularity but also to a predictable backlash. In his 1929 *Historical Overview of Meiji and Taishō Tanka* (*Meiji Taishō tanka shi gaikan*), the poet Saitō Mokichi (1882–1953) wrote that the popular poem left him unimpressed and called it illustrative of predictable human emotions.¹³

The poem had also become inextricably linked to Rengetsu the person and legends about her idiosyncratic personality. Some iterations of the verse included a headnote stating that it was composed “in the season of flowers” (*hana no koro ni*) or “while traveling during the season of flowers” (*hana no koro tabi ni arite*), encouraging biographical readings. In a widely read volume of selected famous verses with narrative headnotes and commentary from 1906 titled *Chats on Poems, Past and Present* (*Kinko kawa*), Rengetsu's verse even receives a substantial backstory:

One day around spring, a certain individual paid a visit to Rengetsu's hermitage in Okazaki. She was nowhere to be seen, but porridge cooking in a clay pot was about to be charred, so he removed it from the fire and waited for the nun to return. Concerned when so much time had passed that he could see nothing but dark shadows, he departed. In the coming days he called upon the nun again, and this time found her at home in her hermitage. He engaged her in conversation and in passing asked her about what had happened the other day. The nun smiled and said, “I wanted to make vegetable porridge and went out to buy some bean curd. While out, I suddenly recalled the cherry blossoms at Yoshino and began heading in that direction. I hadn't any travel money on me and when dusk fell, I asked to be given a night of free lodging at a residence in the mountains but was refused. With nothing else to be done, I made a pillow of grass beneath the flowers, and while contemplating the blossoms, on a piece of pocket paper I wrote the poem . . . ,” which she showed to him.¹⁴

The nun is presented as a spontaneous, free, and easy wanderer in the Daoist vein who goes wherever her instincts lead. In the anecdote, she aims for distant Yoshino, even fancifully suggesting that her night beneath the flowers took place in the famous mountains. The tenor of these “chats on poems” no doubt assumes a reader who takes such narrative vignettes with a grain of salt; the portrayal of eccentric poets and artists was a long-standing convention in works such as *Biographies of Modern Eccentrics*

(*Kinsei kijin den*, 1790). Nevertheless, an understanding took hold of this poem as describing an actual occurrence, making it easy to envision Rengetsu as the traveler turned away, or as a surrogate for readers who might imagine themselves in her position.

In the poem-painting version by Tessai and Rengetsu, Tessai limited the visual motifs to moon, mist, and blossoming branches, creating a lack of specificity that enables a range of associations for and interpretations of the poem. Taking the verse as descriptive of the poet's experience, for example, the branches and moon in the upper part of the painting appear as though being gazed at from below, through the eyes of the rejected traveler lying on the cold ground, their head on a pillow of grass. From this vantage point, the long flower branch rendered in ink reaches down into the composition and extends across the scroll to form a horizontal canopy over the recumbent poet. Occupying the physical place of the poet is the inscription of the poem; given the immediately recognizable quality of Rengetsu's calligraphic hand, the writing seems to embody the nun herself beneath the blossoms. With the branch as a makeshift rooftop, the columns of calligraphy suggest the walls of an alternative lodging to the one denied—a house of word and image fabricated by the nun and her protégé. In this way, the scroll offers a visual resolution to the quandary of the verse, showing the true nature of a lodging (*yado*)—be it an inn, a household, or the corporeal shell of the human body—as merely temporary (*kari no yado*), a metaphor for the illusory phenomenal world. An understanding of the ephemeral nature of the seemingly solid lodging is akin to a larger Buddhist awakening, and this is suggested by the pictorial image of the moon. The particular haziness of the “misty moon” (*oborozuki*) in the poem materializes through faint layers of ink-wash and the mottled ink bleeding ever so slightly into the paper around the circumference of the lunar disk. And yet the moon is not obscured by mist but is depicted as softly luminous, made to appear even more so by the stark contrast of blank white paper and surrounding ink. The image suggests the moment of revelation as the mists clear, bringing forth the full luminosity of insight.

These specific pictorial motifs and poetic Buddhist metaphors have a long history, and here the work draws from that pictorial and textual tradition, enacting the use of “shared sentiment” as in the poetics of Roan described earlier. In this most famous poem, Rengetsu does not merely capture the poet's experience but engages with the classical past. The allusive source (*honka*) for the poem may likely be, as Sugimoto Hidetarō has shown, a verse by the Heian period–courtier Fujiwara Chikamori (dates unknown, ca. 1200):

Turned away at the inn—	やどかさぬ
the person's unkindness	人のつらさぞ
is forgotten	忘れぬる
in a field beneath the clear moon,	月すむのべに
on a night spent sleeping as a traveler.	旅ねせし夜は ¹⁵

It would seem that Rengetsu took her first stanza from this poem, or that the phrase had become common enough to readily employ. Despite this iterative opening, however, by the end of the poem Rengetsu has transformed the verse in a way that conveys

yet other sources of allusion. I would suggest that Rengetsu's poem contains shades of the poetic legacy of the monk-poet Saigyō (1118–1190). The “innkeeper” in the poem, for example, need not merely be anonymous but can be an oblique reference to the person who once rejected Saigyō, a woman identified in certain texts as a courtesan (*yūjo*) of Eguchi named Tae:

“On my way to Tennōji temple it rained, so I asked for lodging at a place called Eguchi; on being refused, I composed”:

天王寺へまゐりけるに、雨の降りければ、江口と申す所に宿を借りけるに、
かさざりければ

It may be difficult	世の中を
for you to despise	厭ふまでこそ
this fleeting world,	かたからめ
but you begrudge me	仮の宿りを
even momentary lodging!	惜しむ君かな

Reply

Because I heard	かへし
that you despised the world	世を厭ふ
my only thought was:	人とし聞けば
do not set your heart	仮の宿に
on this momentary lodging!	心とむなど
	思うばかりぞ ¹⁶

In the famous exchange, Saigyō scolds the woman for what he believes to be a lack of generosity. The woman's rejoinder, however, clarifies that she had acted only with his virtue in mind, taking his Buddhist vows more seriously than the monk himself and refusing to shelter him in a place where he might be led astray.

Rengetsu's poem could be seen as her own reworking of the Saigyō–Eguchi courtesan exchange, especially given the continued currency of this well-known literary topos in the early modern period. Indeed, the poetic exchange between Saigyō and Tae took on a life of its own from the medieval period, embedded within the biographical *Tale of Saigyō* (*Saigyō monogatari*, thirteenth–fifteenth centuries) and elaborated on in anecdotal literature collections (*setsuwa*). The episode was central to the Noh play *Eguchi* (attr. Zeami Motokiyo, 1363–1443), which more than anything elevated the Eguchi courtesan's spiritual standing in the popular imagination.¹⁷ The play ends with a climactic scene in which the courtesan is revealed to be a manifestation of the bodhisattva Fugen (Samantabhadra), who miraculously appears before the monk.¹⁸ The Buddhist message of the play, which emphasizes the Eguchi courtesan's sacred identity, is in keeping with other works by Zeami and the overall medieval Noh repertoire.

Yet other valences of the Eguchi courtesan can be found in the countless images of her depicted as Fugen in the form of hanging scrolls by some of the leading painters of the late Edo period (Figure 4).¹⁹ A painting by Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792), for

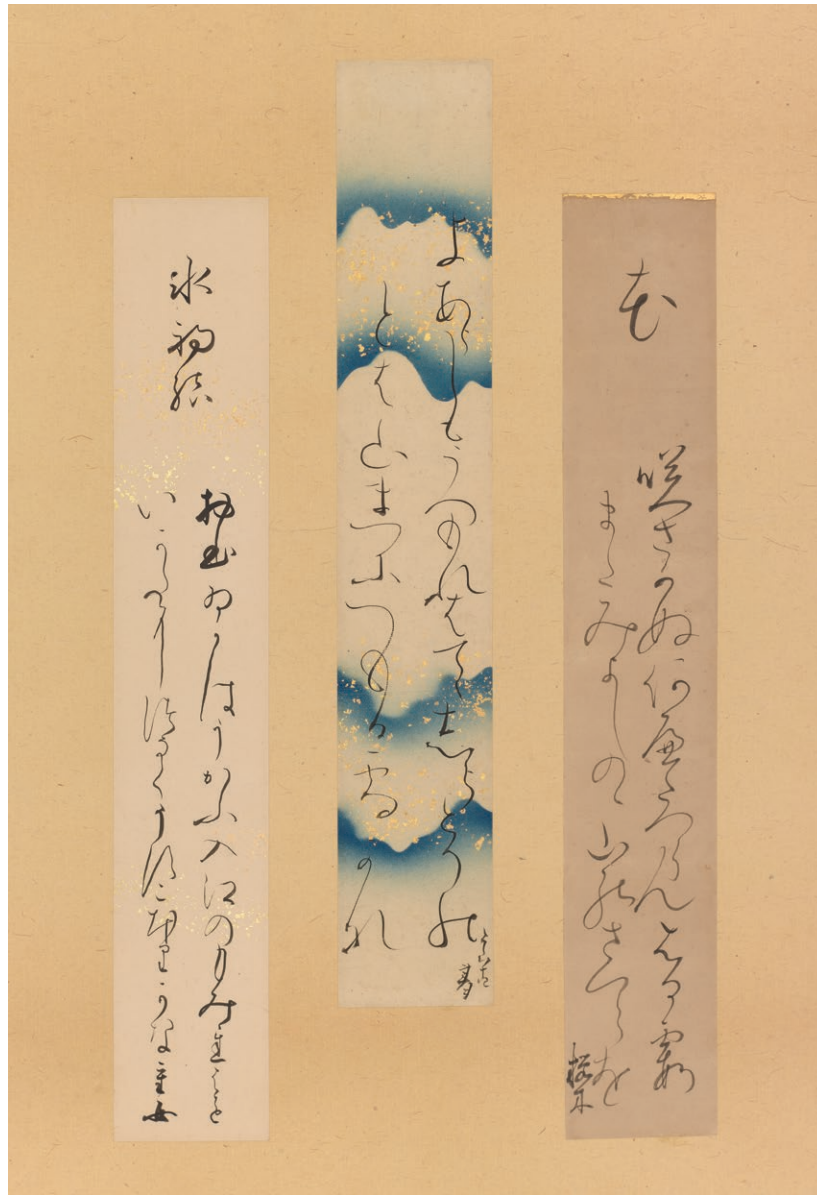


example, depicts the courtesan in Edo period–dress seated atop a white elephant—Fugen’s traditional mount in Buddhist imagery. Such works apply Buddhist non-dualistic concepts like “desire is enlightenment” (*bonnō-soku-bodai*) to contemporary figures and situations, making them appear instantly parodic and mischievous. Compared to the relatively oblique portrayals of the Eguchi courtesan in earlier art and literature, paintings such as Shunshō’s heighten her sexualized persona by association with the widespread visual culture of the brothel and through the comical inscription on the painting that is awash with double entendre.²⁰

No such floating world innuendo appears in Rengetsu’s poem, but an awareness of the Saigyō allusion allows us to recast the innkeeper as the wise courtesan who sent the monk on his way. The elevated poetic and spiritual identity of the courtesan who understands the transitory nature of existence is a figural type that Rengetsu may have embraced. It calls to mind her friendships with and artistic mentoring of female poets and calligraphers such as the courtesan Sakuragi (mid-nineteenth–early twentieth centuries) and Ueda Chikajo (1824–1894), a geisha whose relationship with Rengetsu is immortalized in a postscript she contributed to the nun’s *Ama no karumo* anthology.²¹ In the Cowles Collection, *waka* brushed in the hands of these three women survive as a physical trace of those connections, suggesting the importance

Figure 4. Painting: Katsukawa Shunshō; Calligraphy: Butsumo Keisen, *Courtesan of Eguchi*, ca. 1820s–1830s. Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection, Gift of Mary and Cheney Cowles, 2018, 2018.853.26.

Figure 5. Ōtagaki Rengetsu, Sakuragi, Ueda Chikajo, “The midnight storm” *Waka Poems*, Rengetsu’s verse 1874, others 1870s. Hanging scroll; ink on decorated paper. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: The Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection, Gift of Mary and Cheney Cowles, F2021.2.4a-d.



of reexamining female friendship and artistic collaboration as essential organizing principles of cultural production (Figure 5). With the knowledge that Rengetsu’s biological mother may have been employed in the pleasure quarters, one can imagine the nun extending her empathic imagination to occupy the subject position of the courtesan at Eguchi.

Perhaps the tone of Rengetsu’s poem is more rhetorically distant and is better characterized as didactic in nature. In this case, it could be translated as follows:

The callousness of one
 who refuses to share her abode,
 take it as compassion,
 on a hazy moonlit night
 lying down beneath the flowers.

やどかさぬ
 人のつらさを
 情にて
 おぼろ月よの
 花の下ぶし

Rengetsu's use of the word *compassion* (*nasake*) is of interest. The compiler of Rengetsu's anthology, Kondō Yoshiki (1801–1880), apparently thought the poem would work better without the phrase—which he deemed too difficult to enunciate—suggesting instead that the callousness be “forgotten” (*tsurasa mo wasurekeri*).²² Yet such a seemingly minor change would have disrupted the allusive machinery of the verse in which the central word performs an act of transformation and conjures past associations.²³ The word *compassion* recalls, for example, the interpretation of the Saigyō-Courtesan poetic exchange offered by the Zen monk Musō Soseki (1275–1351). Musō features the two poems in his widely read *Dialogues in a Dream* (*Muchū mondōshū*, 1342), printed editions of which continued to be produced into the mid-Edo period.²⁴ The text is characterized as “vernacular Buddhist teachings” or as a “kana sermon” (*kana hōgo*) because it was not composed in Sinitic Japanese *kanbun* but in Japanese, using characters and phonetic *katakana*.²⁵

Musō's text adopts the question-and-answer format of Zen teachings. In this case, the teacher responds to queries posed by his pupil, the shogun Ashikaga Tadayoshi (1306–1352). When Tadayoshi asks why the Buddhas and bodhisattvas ignore the suffering of sentient beings, Musō quotes the *waka* of Saigyō and Tae and explains, “That which people generally regard as compassion becomes the cause of attachment to the causal world. Hence a lack of compassion and the failure of things to go as one wishes can actually help liberate one from the cycle of samsara.”²⁶ In other words, Musō preaches that “compassion” (*nasake*) denied and the seeming hardship that ensues can be a blessing in disguise. He sets the soteriological stakes high, suggesting that to spend the night in a house of courtesans is to engender deep-rooted attachments that could perpetuate the samsaric cycle and jeopardize one's entire Buddhist practice.

Rengetsu's verse similarly hinges on the notion of how to interpret compassion—the word that she places in the center of her poem—which transforms the *waka* into an illustration of cause and effect. Importantly, Rengetsu does not explicitly signal a reference to Saigyō and the “world-rejecting” with which he was so closely associated. She does not include the adjectival “momentary” (*kari no*) before “inn” (*yado*), which would have triggered immediate Buddhist connotations to the temporary lodging as a metaphor for impermanence (*mujō*). Instead, she focuses on the word *nasake*, which can mean both “sentiment” and “compassion.” This opens up the verse to a greater range of spiritual and aesthetic interpretation, *nasake* being equally crucial to the Buddhist moralistic poetics of Fujiwara Shunzei's (1114–1204) understanding of *mujō*, to Motoori Norinaga's approach to *mono no aware*, and to Roan's poetic theories that incorporate the term. Rengetsu thus masterfully universalizes her poem, allowing the topos of the refusal of lodging to be taken quite literally or to be subject to more metaphorical Buddhist readings.

Taking the representation of cause and effect one step further, we might see the poem as a rendition of Saigyō's life story compressed within the two stanzas of the verse so that the courtesan's compassionless compassion results in the monk breaking the samsaric cycle, as Musō preached. In the legendary chronology of Saigyō's life, he achieved enlightenment, dying beneath the flowers and moon, as illustrated in his death poem.

My wish	願はくは
is to die in spring	花の下に
under the cherry blossoms	はる死なむ
on that day in the Second Month	その如月の
when the moon is full.	望月のころ ²⁷

In Rengetsu's poem, the night beneath the moon and flowers may be symbolic of the night of the Buddha's nirvana—the fifteenth of the second month—as in Saigyō's aspirational verse. The poem would then flash forward from the courtesan's denial to the results of Saigyō staying on the right path. Rengetsu thus writes her own version of a *kana* sermon, in the vein of a lofty Buddhist teacher like Musō. The verse may of course still be interpreted with Rengetsu in the place of the poet-traveler being denied lodging, but by moving away from the personal anecdote, we can envision her as the teacher—as the one with the grasp of the principle of compassion. The multiple identifications enabled by the *waka* form allow for the possibility of envisioning Rengetsu as occupying several subject positions at once: the courtesan Tae who leads Saigyō to enlightenment; the Buddhist teacher who is providing a religious commentary on the classical exchange; or the nun-poet who sees herself as a kind of reincarnation of Saigyō, seeking enlightenment beneath the moon. In this latter regard, Rengetsu thus transforms the poetic anecdote to narrate the story of her own awakening.

In an ultimate act of “shared sentiment” with Saigyō, Rengetsu reworked his death poem in her own.

My wish	願はくは
is to be in the next world	のちの蓮の
seated on a lotus flower,	花の上に
gazing at	くもらぬ月を
the cloudless moon above.	みるよしもがな

Similarities between the two poems include the use of the same idiosyncratic first line and motifs of a flower and the moon.²⁸ While Saigyō remains in the worldly realm in his death poem, longing to die on the same day as the Historical Buddha, Rengetsu envisions herself already in the realm beyond—not beneath the flowers but above the lotus flower. Although Saigyō's poem became one of his most famous, as Jack Stoneman has explained, the first line was considered unorthodox for *waka*, other than for *waka* explicitly in the “Buddhist teachings” (*shakkyō*) category, since it derived from the Sinitic language of Buddhist sutras.²⁹ Even the Buddhist-inclined Shunzei called its usage by Saigyō unattractive. Rengetsu's use of the same phrase to start her own death poem is striking, and it suggests the degree to which she took inspiration from the Heian period-monk-poet and perhaps even modeled her practice on his life and work, much like Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) had done earlier in the Edo period.³⁰

Rengetsu inscribed her death poem on a scroll between an image of the moon above and a self-portrait below (Figure 6). She portrays herself wearing the dark robes of a nun and seemingly with a walking stick in hand, an image of the peripatetic

traveler, like Saigyō or Bashō reborn.³¹ In the context of the death poem, the journey captured in the painting can only be interpreted as a spiritual one. The composition of Rengetsu's self-portrait is intriguing because it prefigures the creation of her death shroud, which is described in a remarkable anecdote recounted by Tomioka Tessai.³² When Rengetsu was in her seventies, she had asked Tessai to paint her namesake imagery of lotus flower (*ren*) and moon (*getsu*) on a white cotton cloth (*furoshiki*) she had made herself. The nun folded it up, put it away, and Tessai soon forgot about the episode. When Rengetsu passed away at the age of eighty-five, the women of the village washed her body and wrapped it in that very cloth. Beholding her enshrouded body, Tessai realized that between the images of the lotus and moon he had rendered years earlier, Rengetsu had inscribed her death verse. Unbeknownst to Tessai, Rengetsu had quietly orchestrated one final collaboration between herself and her younger student. Between Tessai's lotus and moon pictures, Rengetsu brushed a poem that imagines herself after death between the lotus and the moon. Rengetsu graphically represented herself through the Buddhist name she had taken over fifty years before in her own calligraphic lettering, representing a fervent desire, as Tessai suggests, that her body and mind in this world and the next be pure and unsullied (like the lotus flower) and achieve ultimate illumination (symbolized by the clear moon). Poetically, graphically, and pictorially, Rengetsu rehearsed the negation and subsequent rebirth of the self, and she did so in the most literal act of embodied inscription she had ever performed, using her own body covered in the shroud as the vehicle for her *waka*.

RENGETSU'S WAKA CORPUS APPEARS to be characterized by a bold assertiveness of selfhood in the foregrounded voice of the poet and in the materiality of her work: the uniquely etched incisions of haptic poetry on her pottery, the unwavering distinctiveness of her calligraphic style, the consistent inclusion of her name and age on her works, and the way her collaborators often sublimate their own styles to match her artistic register. And yet, as we have seen, this self-assertion need not be interpreted on an individualistic level but rather envisioned as symbiotic with poetic personae who came before. For an artist most readily associated with embodiment, this final inscriptive act reads as a seamless relinquishing of embodiment anchored in a poem that transforms the self by taking the personhood of her name and inserting it exquisitely into the landscape of the next world, anticipating the dissolution of body and poem in the funeral pyre.

Given the textual and visual examples examined here, it is clear that Saigyō's biography and poetic output represented much more than a source of allusions for Rengetsu. She seems to have communed spiritually with the famous monk-poet in a way that shaped her artistic output, compelling her to incorporate and transform the source texts. Such a relationship can only be gleaned when her work is contextualized and her engagement with the poetic theories of her day is analyzed, not through volumes of theory, which

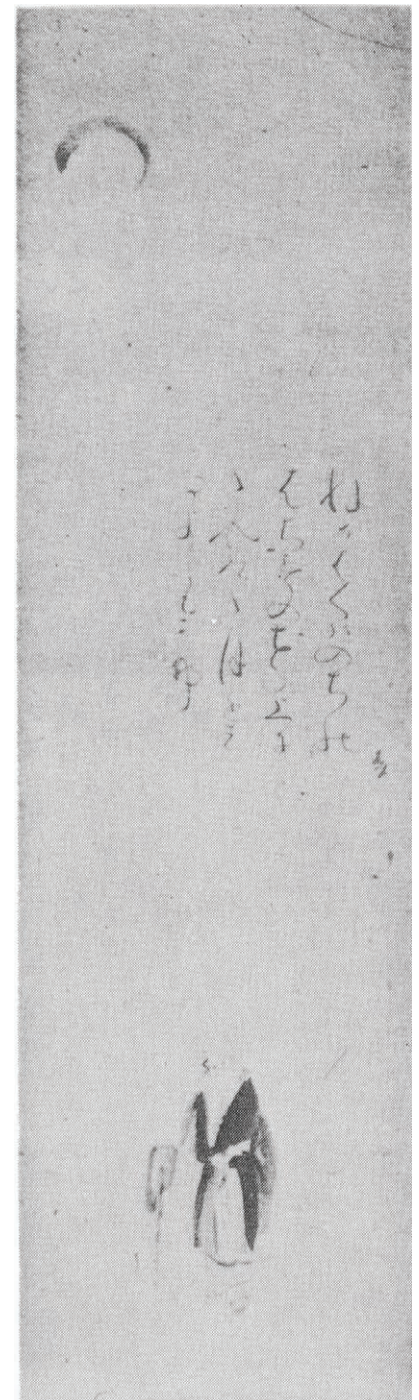


Figure 6. Ōtagaki Rengetsu, *Moon Viewing Death Verse Self-Portrait*, Hanging scroll; ink on paper. Reproduced from Murakami Sodō, ed. *Rengetsu-ni zenshū. Zōho*. Expanded edition. Kyōto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1980. Unpaginated plate.

she was in no position to have written, but through her practice. There we find her *waka* poetics in action and witness the process by which she worked through poetic sources and envisioned an intersubjective relationship with them and their authors, as in her final creative act: enfolding herself within poetic worlds of past, present, and future, understood as one.

Notes

1. On Rengetsu's biography, also see Lee Johnson, *The Life and Art of Ōtagaki Rengetsu* (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1988). While space does not allow for a discussion of Rengetsu's *waka* inscribed on pottery here, I explore the topic in "Ōtagaki Rengetsu's Haptic Poetics," a lecture delivered at the University of Chicago, Department of Art History, March 12, 2021; and I point the reader to Sayumi Takahashi's important work on the materiality of Rengetsu's poetry in "Beyond Our Grasp? Materiality, Meta-genre and Meaning in the Po(e)ttery of Rengetsu-ni," in *Hermeneutical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature*, PAJLS: Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies, ed. Michael F. Marra (West Lafayette, Ind.: Association for Japanese Literary Studies, 2004), 261-278.

2. On the cosmic end of the spectrum would be Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), who believed the restrictions imposed on the diction of *waka* enabled its spiritual connection with the past. For an expansive study on Norinaga's ideas, see Emi Joanne Foulk, "The Jeweled Broom and the Dust of the World: Keichū, Motoori Norinaga, and Kokugaku in Early Modern Japan" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2016), 104-159.

3. Thomas describes Rengetsu's poetry as moving from "impersonalism," representing the stylistic preferences of Kagawa Kageki (1768-1843) and members of his Keien school of poetry to "personalism," emphasizing the voice and perspective of the poet. See Roger K. Thomas, *The Way of Shikishima: Waka Theory and Practice in Early Modern Japan* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008), 181-185.

4. Rengetsu's encounter with Roan's texts occurred in Nara during a trip she recounts in a prose poem travel essay titled "When I Was in Summer Retreat near the Great Buddha" ("Daibutsu no hotori ni ge o musubikeru ori"), reproduced after the last section of poems in the anthology of her work, *A Diver's Harvested Seaweed (Ama no karumo)*. See Murakami Sodō, ed., *Rengetsu-ni zenshū*, vol. 1 (Kyoto: Rengetsu-ni Zenshū Hanpukai, 1927), 59-67.

5. Thomas, *Way of Shikishima*, 184. Rengetsu's comments occur in two letters to Murakami Tadamasu (among twenty-seven that survive), transcribed in a section of the *Rengetsu zenshū* devoted to her correspondence in Murakami Sodō, *Rengetsu-ni zenshū*, vol. 2 (Kyoto: Rengetsu-ni Zenshū Hanpukai, 1927), 30, 36.

6. Many of Rengetsu's *waka* were produced at the request of others for specific occasions and as a means of making a living; as Haruo Shirane has said of the poems of Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), they "functioned dialogically, in a communal context, fulfilling socio-religious functions." Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 160.

7. This discussion of Roan's theories is indebted to Thomas, *The Way of Shikishima*, 76-82, and to articles cited therein: Nakamura Yukihiko, "Ozawa Roan karon no shin kentō," in *Nakamura Yukihiko chojutsushū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1984-1989), 266-284; and Watabe Osamu, "Ozawa Roan no shisō ni tsuite," in *Kinsei waka shisō kenkyū* (Tokyo: Jichōsha, 1991), 76-94.

8. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

9. I am grateful to Jack Chris Stoneman for this and another translation in note 28.

10. An illustration of the Wada Gozan painting is illustrated in Koresawa Kyōzō et al.,

Rengetsu (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1971), plate 118; for more on Rengetsu's collaborative projects, see Sayumi Takahashi, "Ōtagaki Rengetsu's *Gassaku*: Friendship and the Spirit of Collaboration," in *Black Robe, White Mist: Art of the Japanese Buddhist Nun Rengetsu* (Canberra, Australia: National Gallery of Australia, 2007), 107–117.

11. Translation used with the kind permission of the Rengetsu Foundation Project, Kyoto; John Walker and Kazuya Ōyama, translators.

12. Michael F. Marra, *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 17.

13. Cited in Sugimoto Hidetarō, *Ōtagaki Rengetsu*, rev. ed. (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1988), 26–27.

14. The passage is reproduced in Sugimoto, *Ōtagaki Rengetsu*, 28–29. The original publication is Nishimura Tenshū and Isono Shūsho, eds., *Kinko kawa* (Osaka: Sekibunsha, 1906), with the Rengetsu anecdote, poem, and commentary on pp. 121–123.

15. Chikamori's poem appears in the *Collection of Monthly Shrine Offering Verses (Tsukimōde wakashū)*, compiled by the head priest of the Kamo Shrine, Kamo no Shigeyasu (1119–1191) in *Zoku gunsho ruijū*, 3rd ed., 7th printing, vol. 14, plate 1, Waka bu, maki 368 (Tokyo: Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1990), 103. Cited in Sugimoto Hidetarō, *Ōtagaki Rengetsu*, rev. ed. (Kyoto: Tōyō Shobō, 2004), 253–254.

16. *Shinkokinshū* 978, 979 (*Sankashū* 752, 753), translation from Jack Stoneman, "Constructing Saigyō: Poetry, Biography, and Medieval Reception" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006), 188, 469–470.

17. Ikumi Kaminishi describes this change in emphasis on the character of Lady Eguchi and argues for its influence in paintings by Maruyama Ōkyo and others. See Ikumi Kaminishi, "Skillful Means (upāya) of the Courtesan as Bodhisattva Fugen: Maruyama Ōkyo's Lady Eguchi," in *Gender, Continuity, and the Shaping of Modernity in the Arts of East Asia, 16th–20th Centuries*, eds. Kristen L. Chiem and Lara C. W. Blanchard (Boston: Brill, 2017), 127.

18. The Noh play *Eguchi* fuses together the episode between Saigyō and the courtesan at Eguchi as well as a separate episode from the biography of the monk Shōkū Shōnin (ca. 907–ca. 1007) found in the *setsuwa* collection *Senjūshō* (compiled ca. 1250–1287) in which he encounters a courtesan who turns into Fugen every time he closes his eyes. See Nishio Koichi, ed., *Senjūshō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970), 190–195. Discussions of this story appear in Michael F. Marra, *Representations of Power: The Literary Politics of Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 92–93; in the context of literary representations of *asobi*, see Terry Kawashima, *Writing Margins: The Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 51–57. Representations of Shōkū and his backstory are discussed in Melissa McCormick, *Tosa Mitsunobu and the Small Scroll in Medieval Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 172–205.

19. Important examples are discussed in Kaminishi, "Skillful Means (upāya) of the Courtesan."

20. The entry for this work on the Metropolitan Museum of Art website notes the erotic double entendre and phallic imagery in the inscription.

21. The essay by Paul Berry in this volume provides more information on these women and shows how they, with the addition of Shikibu, were thought of as an informal salon of female poets. For Chikajō's postscript, see Murakami, *Rengetsu-ni zenshū*, 1:3–4 (repaginated following Rengetsu's poems and writings).

22. The editors of *Kinko kawa* (1906) (see note 14) relate Kondō Yoshiki's suggestion for revision; it does not appear in Kondō's preface to Rengetsu's anthology. The remark is cited in Sugimoto, *Ōtagaki Rengetsu*, 26. Sugimoto argues that Kondō's suggested revision completely misses the point of Rengetsu's verse, which he views as a moralistic poem, or *dōka*, the message of which would have been lost without the word for *compassion*.

23. Rengetsu was famously averse to having her poems anthologized in print, which Sayumi Takashi has compellingly argued derived from a reluctance to have her *waka* unmoored from the materiality so central to her practice. Takahashi, “Beyond Our Grasp?,” 270–271. Another reason Rengetsu may have been against the printed anthology was the concern that the compiler might reframe or revise her *waka* in a way that distorted its original import, as in Kondō’s rumored suggested revision.

24. For more on the *Muchū mondōshū*, see Molly Vallor, *Not Seeing Snow: Musō Sōseki and Medieval Japanese Zen* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); and for the full translation, see Thomas Yūhō Kirchner, *Dialogues in a Dream: The Life and Zen Teachings of Musō Soseki* (Somerville, Mass.: Wisdom, 2015).

25. For Edo period–editions of Musō’s *Muchū mondōshū* in the collection of the National Diet Library, see, for example, <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2544529/1>.

26. For a modern transcription of the Japanese, see Kawase Kazuma, *Muchū mondōshū*, Kōdansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 1441 (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 2000), 36–46. Translated by Kirchner, *Dialogues in a Dream*, 80–81. 情けといえることは皆妄執をとどむる因縁なりされば人の情けもなく世の意に叶わぬことは出離生死のたよりのなるべし。

27. Jack Stoneman, trans., *Shinkokinshū* 1846 (*Sankashū* 77), in *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600*, ed. Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 578–579. The poem also appears in the prose-poem tale of Saigyō’s life (*Saigyō monogatari*).

28. Rengetsu wrote more than one death verse, including one that uses the same first line: “My wish is to die in the light of the autumn moon—if so, then I shall not wander in darkness (Negawaku wa / tsuki no kage nite / akishinan / saraba yami ni mo / mayowazara mashi); translation by Jack Chris Stoneman.

29. Stoneman points out that the verse was not included in the imperial poetry anthologies *Senzaishū* (1187), compiled by Shunzei; or *Shinkokinshū* (1207), compiled by Teika. Stoneman, “Constructing Saigyō,” 118–119. Rengetsu’s use of this unorthodox word would also accord with Ozawa Roan’s openness to incorporating “non-poetic” (*zoku*) diction in *waka*.

30. It is important to keep in mind how Rengetsu’s understanding of Saigyō is mediated through multiple layers of historical reception by Bashō and many others, including Zen monk Ryōkan Taigu (1758–1831) and the author of *Confessions of Lady Nijō* (*Towazugatari*, 1313), who came to be known as the “female Saigyō” (*onna Saigyō*).

31. The whereabouts of the painting are currently unknown, and although the details are difficult to discern, it clearly draws upon the well-established iconography of traveling poets, specifically that of Saigyō.

32. Murakami Sodō, *Rengetsu-ni zenshū*, vol. 3 (Kyoto: Rengetsu-ni Zenshū Hanpukai, 1927), 208. The editor of the biographical section (*denki*) of the *zenshū*, where this account is found, was the poet, critic, and publisher Yosano Tekkan (1873–1935). At the time of the collection’s publication, he had given up his pen name of “Tekkan” and reverted to “Hiroshi,” a name given to him by Rengetsu, who was a close friend of his father, Yosano Reigon (1823–1898). Hirako Kyōko, *Yosano Akiko. Nenpyō sakka-dokuhon* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1995), 36.