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Akazome Emon: Her Poetic Voice and Her Persona

Takeshi Watanabe

Some of us may have first encountered the name of Akazome Emon 赤染衛門 (c.960 - c.1045) as the purported author of *Eiga monogatari*, *The Tale of Flowering Fortunes*. Yet for many others, Murasaki Shikibu probably introduced them to Akazome.

The wife of the Governor of Tanba is known to those around Her Majesty and His Excellency as Masahira Emon. She may not be a genius but she has great poise and does not feel that she has to compose a poem on everything she sees, merely because she is a poet. Those poems we know, even those composed for casual occasions, leave us all embarrassed about our own.

丹波の守の北の方をば、宮殿などのわたりには、匡衡衛門とぞいひ侍る。ことにやむごとなきほどならねど、まことにゆゑゆゑしく、歌よみとて、よろづのことにつけてよみちらさねど、聞こえたるかぎりは、はかなきをりふしのことも、それこそ恥づかしき口つきに侍れ。¹

When compared to the criticism leveled against some of the other court women, these are laudatory words coming from an esteemed authority. Yet Murasaki's praise did not resonate much beyond her time. In modern times, studies of Akazome's poetry have been few. Monographs about her even in

The author thanks Edward Kamens, Aileen Gatten, Joseph Sorensen and others who have offered helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

¹ Richard Bowring, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 54. *Makura no sōshi Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, Ikeda Kikan 池田龜鑑, Kishigami Shinji 岸上慎二, Akiyama Ken 秋山虔, *NKBT* 19.495-6.

Japanese can be counted on one hand. When compared to Ono no Komachi, Sei Shōnagon, or Izumi Shikibu, the contemporaneous paragons of the Heian female voice, the neglect becomes all the more apparent. Forgetfulness about accomplished court women such as Akazome stems from modern desires for a certain kind of poetry and its female auteur, expectations which she does not fulfill.

Yet, as Murasaki's praise suggests, Akazome's poems were esteemed in the eleventh century. They thus allow us to contemplate the ideals of Heian poetry that may have disappeared from our view. I would like to discuss today some of her poems that expand our vision of the female role in Heian literary and social practices. My discussion will revolve around Akazome's relationships with three men – Fujiwara no Michinaga, Ōe no Takachika, and Ōe no Masahira – her patron, son and husband, respectively. Poems composed in her interactions with them challenge the conventional portrait of the introspective, passive woman. They show her to be active at the court, sometimes assuming the voices of its other members, singing with and for them in various settings. I contend that Akazome was a consummate professional – a court attendant who specialized in poetry. Such professionalism is an identity that not many Japanese women have been accorded, even in modern times.

By "professional," I am attributing several characteristics to Akazome's work, qualities that I will describe by discussing her poems with Michinaga, Takachika, and Masahira. With all three, she demonstrates the versatility as a poet. She frequently does not sing for herself about herself; but rather, she

takes pride in being able to find respond properly to various situations. Such acumen for finding the bon mot was based on her lifelong career at the court and knowing what was socially appropriate. My identification of her as a professional thus rests not on any concrete remuneration or a career trajectory, but on her verses for others in the context of her attendance at the court, on the fluidity with which she works with various discourses, and on the confidence she shows in the efficacy of her verses. These traits did not travel well beyond her time, as they were wedded to the social fabric of her time and place.

MICHINAGA

Through her work with Michinaga, we see her fulfilling a role that might be the closest to our conception of a job. On several occasions, Akazome wrote what could be construed as proxy poems (*daisaku*) for Michinaga. Since much of his correspondence must have been routine, Michinaga no doubt had other staff to mind his correspondence. Still, it is notable to see him delegate some of his obligatory letter writing to a woman.

To His Excellency, someone sent a tale, *Cherry Blossoms*. On its wrapping paper, it was written:

I gathered these cherry petals with care:
please do not let mischievous winds scatter them.

かきつむる心もあるをはなざくらあだなる風にちらさずもがな

“Send a response,” His Excellency said, so:

When I take a look, far from treating them lightly, those cherry blossoms,

I regret even their scattering into the realm.

みる程はあだにだにせず花ざくらよにちらんだにをしとこそ思へ²

The subject of these poems, the tale *Hanazakura*, does not survive under this title, but it may refer to “Hanazakura oru shōshō” 花桜折る少将, found in *Tsutsumi Chūnagon monogatari* 堤中納言物語.

Whatever this work may be, the episode shows Michinaga’s involvement with the production and circulation of texts with Akazome as his assistant or literary consultant.

The professional relationship between Akazome and Michinaga extended beyond this one occurrence. One poem in her anthology explicitly states that she composed a poem for a screen on Michinaga’s order.³ More well known were her screen poems composed for the seventieth-birthday celebrations of Rinshi, Michinaga’s main wife. They earned praise from Ryōsen 良暹 (c. 998-1065), an eleventh-century peer.⁴ According to *Fukuro zōshi* (completed 1157), he is said to have stated:

Izumi Shikibu and Akazome Emon are both poetic sages. Yet ten out of the twelve screen poems Akazome composed for the seventieth-birthday celebrations of Takatsukasadono Rinshi were superb. Many of her poems for the Kayanoin poetry contest were superb as well. For screen poems, Izumi hardly compares with Akazome.

Ryōsen’s comments underline Akazome’s talent for versifying on public occasions, in contrast to Izumi Shikibu. Here is the first poem of the series to which he alludes:

Purple sleeves layered one after another:

² Poems 166 and 167, *AESZ* p. 145-7.

³ Poem 143, *AESZ* p. 124-5.

⁴ Fujioka Tadami 藤岡忠美, editor, *Fukuro zōshi*, *SNKBT* 29.78.

this sight is what is joyful about spring's arrival.

紫の袖を連ねてきたるかな春たつことはこれぞうれしき⁵

This spring poem for the first month marks the beginning of the cycle of screens on annual observances.⁶ As a *byōbu uta*, it corresponds to the scene illustrated for the first month: high-ranking nobles arriving for the Regent's Special Banquet (*rinji kyaku* 臨時客) held on the second day of the New Year. Its verbal wit may be characterized by its use of related words that tie the image of the sleeves together with the idea of spring: *haru* ("spring" as well as "to spread"), *kitaru* (*ku* plus auxiliary *tari* "were entering" as well as *kiru* plus *tari* "were wearing"), and *tatsu* ("to come" as well as "to cut" cloth). The monthly cycle provided Akazome with an apt metaphor for her many years with Rinshi, alluded to again in the layering of purple sleeves. We detect her feelings over the decades as she witnessed this banquet from year to year, along with the increasing fortunes of her mistress. The poem is also tinged with a knowingness that they had, meanwhile, both grown old, "wearing" the many springs spent together (*tsuranete kitaru haru*). Yet without this context or the knowledge of court observances, this poem would lose much of its

⁵ Poem 598, *AESZ* p. 538. This poem is also in *Goshūi wakashū* (poem 14) and the poetic treatise *Korai fūteishō* 古来風躰抄 (1197) by Fujiwara no Shunzei 俊成 (1114-1204). With slight differences, this poem is in *Eiga monogatari*, Yamanaka Yutaka 山中裕, Akiyama Ken, Ikeda Naotaka 池田尚隆, Fukunaga Susumu 福長進, *SNKBZ* 3.231. For this article, the enumeration of poems from the *Akazome Emon shū* will follow the *AESZ*, based on the *rufubon*.

⁶ Kubota Jun 久保田淳, Hirata Yoshinobu 平田喜信, editors, *Goshūi wakashū*, *SNKBT* 8.16. Ariyoshi Tamotsu 有吉保, editor, *Karonshū*, *NKBZ* 50.420.

emotional impact, suggesting why Akazome's poems, even her well-known such as this one, have not resonated with readers beyond her contemporaries.

Akazome's poems based on the *Lotus Sutra* could even be placed in this category of commissioned public poems, for they may have been composed as part of the funeral services of Senshi, Michinaga's sister.⁷ Indeed, Akazome's poem on the Devadatta chapter (poem 438) shares lines with Michinaga's on the same theme, suggesting how Akazome's literary production meshed with her patron's activities.⁸ The *Hanazakura* vignette then reminds us that in certain contexts, women could unabashedly speak for men even at the highest ranks, mediate their interactions with texts, and interact with them as professionals, not just as lovers.

TAKACHIKA

Akazome also wrote for her son, Ōe no Takachika 挙周 (c. 977 - 1046). In the context of three different courtships, Akazome composes poems upon her son's request, often in his voice. In her anthology, her poems for Takachika showcase her ability to versify when needed, according to the social context. They undercut our understanding of love songs as solely revelations about one's innermost feelings for another.

⁷ See footnote to poem 427, *AESZ* p. 379-80.

⁸ *AESZ* p. 391-2; Michinaga's poem is in the *Shin Kokinshū* (*SNKBT* p. 562).

That said, these poems are not insincere or emotionless. As she intervenes in her son's deteriorating relationships, we see her knowingness not only about the efficacy of her craft, but also its limitations.

The fragile relationship between Takachika and Takashina no Akinobu's daughter 高階明順の娘 begins:

After Takachika began seeing Akinobu's daughter, he was newly appointed as a chamberlain, and had no time to go visit her. "I want to send her a letter," he said, so in his place, I wrote:

As restless as the snipe beating its wings at dawn, awakened,
how many times have you tossed and turned – so I wonder.

しぎ
暁の鳴のはねがき目をさめてかくらんかずをおもひこそやれ⁹

From our vantage point, a mother composing love poems for her busy son seems rather counterproductive. Perhaps because of this gap in social expectations, we might dwell on Akazome's identity as a concerned, somewhat meddling mother. As I will later discuss, this identity accords with later representations of Akazome as an example of the *ryōsai kenbo*, a good wife, wise mother. Yet such proxy compositions offer Akazome the opportunity to display her artistry and to challenge her poetic skills in situations that rest outside the possibilities of her own experience. In this case, it seems that Akazome's

⁹ Poem 224, *AESZ* p.199-201. Akazome alludes to poem 761 in the *Kokinshū*: "On nights without you, / I lie on this side and that, / restless as the snipe / beating and beating again / his wings in the graying dawn" 暁の鳴のはねがき羽書き百羽ももはがき君が来ぬ夜は我ぞ数かく (McCullough, *Kokin Wakashū*, p. 168).

initial interventions worked. After another surrogate exchange about the pain of separation and waiting, we read that Akinobu's daughter came to live with Takachika and Akazome.

This person [Akinobu's daughter] was welcomed here, and she was living with us when she got upset over a trifle and some trouble ensued. Just at that time, I went to pay my respects at Hase. I thought I would show them the autumn leaves, so I had a maple branch broken off. Yet being angry as she was, she stuck it in somewhere, and left it to wither.

Seeing the branch, [I composed]:

As a gift from my trip, I broke off some autumn foliage, now withered, caught up in the storm's strong winds.

つとにとてをりし紅葉はかれにけり嵐のいたく吹きしまぎれに¹⁰

With the long preface, Akazome underscores her position as a bystander, metonymically represented by the maple branch. Unlike her proxy poems, here she positions herself as an outsider. She is unable to enter into the couple's emotional conflict, though she cares about them both. Her isolation from them is compounded by the enacted utterance of the poem to herself. Notwithstanding her failure to initiate a reconciliation, or the lack of verbal acrobatics, the simple image of the withered branch makes for a memorable poem. It is an evocative illustration not only of the fragility of human relationships, but also of the sadness we may have felt when trying to help others to no avail. It is striking that this poem, which I consider to be one of her more personal verses, resonates emotionally with us, much more so than her more ostensibly public words.

¹⁰ Poem 228, *AESZ* p. 204.

Indeed, though Akazome continues to mediate, Akinobu's daughter ends up separating from Takachika. Akinobu's daughter makes her final appearance in the following poem, which marks the end of this doomed relationship. Akazome again acts as the surrogate poet.

This person sent here, by mistake, a letter addressed to another man. I had Takachika attach this poem:

With whom are you exchanging letters again? What a cold heart to cause yet more pain than those sorrows adrift the floating bridge.

たれとまたふみ通ふらんうき橋のうかりしよりもうきころかな¹¹

Akazome uses the image of "the floating bridge" (*ukihashi*) to invoke a cluster of related words of pain and treachery associated with fickle love. The repetition of *uki* forcefully conveys her disappointment after Takachika's string of failed relationships. This series of poems with Akinobu's daughter thus tells the story of a worried and protective mother, watching as her son's marriage deteriorates. Yet their inclusion in the anthology (in contrast to their making) also suggests their composer's assessment of them as notable poems within a broad compositional array. After all, in terms of practical effect, they could be judged to have been failures.

On the other hand, Takachika also figures prominently in a series of *katoku setsuwa* about Akazome and the efficacy of her poems. The stories appear in various collections such as *Konjaku*

¹¹ Poem 232, *AESZ* p. 208. Akazome uses "the floating bridge" (*ukihashi*) as a preface to the associated word, "ushi" (憂し, "painful"), conjugated as *ukari* above. *Ushi* can be conjugated as *uki*, which additionally means "to float" or in *ukikokoro*, a fickle heart, as well as a hateful, pitiless one.

monogatari shū, *Fukuro zōshi*, and *Kokon chomonjū*. In one episode, Akazome appeals to Empress Shōshi to obtain for her son the governorship of Izumi Province.

On the night the New Year's Promotions were to begin, I went to see Her Highness as the snow fell heavily. After I made my appeal for Takachika, I excused myself, leaving this poem.

Just think of my anxious feelings, brushing the snow off of my head,
as I hurry to you before the disappearing prospect.

おもへただかしらの雪をはらひつつきえぬさきにといそぐ心を¹²

The narrator of the *Konjaku* version tells us the result of Akazome's endeavors: "The Lord Michinaga, seeing this poem, was deeply moved and made Takachika the governor of Izumi Province."¹³

Although she did not directly address Michinaga, this episode still shows her working in the political arena with little hesitation. Of course, she went about her business in the proper way for a female court attendant – through Empress Shōshi, and the discourse of poetry. However, much has not been made of this act, because even if her intrusion into male court appointments seems alien to her gender as conceived in later times, her identity as a concerned mother, emphasized by the other *setsuwa* about her, has overshadowed her political savvy that came from her professional career.

¹² Poem 327, *AESZ* p. 296. There are some slight differences in the poem as recorded in other texts, including *Shika wakashū*, *Fukuro zōshi*, *Kohon setsuwa shū* 古本説話集, *Kokon chomonjū* 古今著聞集, and *Shasekishū* 沙石集.

¹³ *Konjaku monogatari shū*, *NKBZ* 23.411.

MASAHIRA

Today, Akazome's reputation mainly rests not on her work, but on her identity as a paragon of the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*).¹⁴ This persona is based on the stories contained in many *setsuwa* collections. As we have seen, however, her representation in these accounts is not so straightforward when viewed afresh. Similarly, stories involving Akazome and her husband, Ōe no Masahira (952-1012), provide a counterpoint to the conventional image of the lovelorn lady of the Heian period. Although these episodes superficially present her as the good wife, the couple in fact enjoyed an equal relationship, and their literary collaboration shows Akazome working with Masahira as a respected, professional partner.

A story in *Fukuro zōshi* underscores Akazome's work outside the woman's sphere. The vignette tells of Fujiwara no Kintō's attempt to resign after being passed over for a promotion. He first asks Ki no Tadana 紀齊名 (957-999) and Ōe no Mochitoki 大江以言 (955-1010) to write a preface to his petition. Having found theirs to be unsatisfactory, he then asks Masahira, who agrees reluctantly. At home, Akazome finds her husband looking troubled. He tells his wife that he does not know why Kintō found the previous efforts wanting. After a pause, she says, "He is a man of considerable pride. Perhaps they did not write of how he

¹⁴ Aside from the biography by Uemura Etsuko (*Ōchō no shūkajin: Akazome Emon*), short essays about Akazome continue to emphasize her qualities as a good wife and mother, as evident in their titles. Umeno Kimiko 梅野きみ子, "Akazome Emon: ryōsai kenbo no kagami," *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 65.8 (2000): 116-24. Mizusawa Tatsuki 水沢龍樹, "Akazome Emon: Ōe no Masahira no tsuma," *Rekishi dokuhon* 51.11 (2006): 80-83.

has fallen into such obscurity despite his distinguished lineage. Please write of this.” Sure enough, when Masahira reviews the drafts, he discovers that this critical point was overlooked.¹⁵ Masahira’s resulting preface, which can be found in *Honchō monzui* 本朝文粹, deeply impresses Kintō.¹⁶ From a passage in Michinaga’s diary, we find that the petition proved effective: Kintō was raised to Junior Second Rank.¹⁷

From our perspective, this episode may seem to diminish Akazome’s own accomplishment. She is at home. She only assists her husband when needed, and then, in a non-threatening way, not going as far as to write the petition herself. Still, the episode does show Akazome to be more aware than her husband of political matters. Here, she does not write for men, but she can think like them. There is, of course, the possibility that this account in *Fukuro zōshi* was exaggerated, or even fabricated. Yet had her reputation not supported this portrait and its apparent veracity, such stories would not have made it into Kiyosuke’s collection of literary lore. In their very circulation, people acknowledged that she had the experience, sense, and literary talent to speak for her community.

The above story presents Akazome as a valuable contributor to Masahira’s work, instead of being relegated only to their domestic life. Remember how Murasaki Shikibu referred to her as “Masahira Emon,”

¹⁵ *SNKBT* 29.125.

¹⁶ Ōsone Shōsuke 大曾根章介, Kinpara Tadashi 金原理, and Gotō Akio 後藤昭雄, editors, *Honchō monzui*, *SNKBT* 27.235-6.

¹⁷ Entry for 7th month, 21st day, Kankō 2 (1005), *Midō Kanpaku ki*, Tokyo Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjō, editor (Iwanami, 1952-1954), 1.153.

the name by which she apparently went at the court. This appellation is an unusual case where a husband's given name has been attached to his wife, along with her father's court position. There have been several interpretations of this name and its implications, but one has it as a reflection of how Akazome was seen as being "one with her husband."¹⁸ Whether we accept this romantic view of the couple, an exchange of poems upon the birth of Takachika gives us another glimpse into the nature of their relationship. Masahira expresses his dissatisfaction over a wet nurse.

Upon discovering that the woman summoned to be the wet nurse produced little milk, Masahira composed the following poem:

Perhaps she had taken the task too lightly, coming as a wet nurse without much milk or learning to a scholar's house.

はかなくも思ひけるかなちもなくて博士の家の乳母せんとは

Akazome replied:

It may be so, but if she at least has some *yamato* smarts, let her stay with her thin milk and learning.

さもあらばあれ 山と心し かしこくは ほそぢにつけて ならず 許ほかりぞ¹⁹

By opening her poem with the flourish, *samo areba are*, Akazome ends up with a seven-syllable phrase instead of the customary five syllables. Yet by employing this Japanese reading for the Chinese compound *zhēmò* 遮莫, she pokes fun at the pompousness of her husband's complaint. Scholars such as

¹⁸ AESZ, p. 24.

¹⁹ Poems 1217 and 1218, *Goshūishū* (SNKBT 8.395-6). For another translation, see Edwin Cranston, translator, *A Waka Anthology: Grasses of Remembrance*, pp. 551-2. This exchange is not found in *Akazome Emon shū*.

Saigō Nobutsuna 西郷信綱 have observed how Akazome valorizes the *yamatogokoro* that she senses in the wet-nurse, whom she defends.²⁰ Indeed, Akazome takes her husband’s pun on *chi* (homonym for “milk” and “learning”) and has the witty, last word. While poetry was in general a discursive space where Heian women could engage more or less equally with men, this exchange – through its unusual topic and diction – extends our conventional image of a tenth-century relationship. Akazome and Masahira were, what we might call today, a “power couple” in their intellectual connection.

Aside from such squabbles, the two had their share of the typical Heian marital difficulties. In one exchange, Masahira expresses his jealousy, assuming the role of the suspicious, possessive woman.

Upon seeing me depart for [Rinshi’s] residence in another man’s carriage, that same person [Masahira]:

Off you went in the carriage outside the gate,
the heat of my feelings burned my heart.

かどのとのくるまにのりて出でしかば思ひにむねのうちぞこがるる

In reply:

That carriage outside the gate, I should no doubt mount,
since I am one who has not been taken into your heart.

かどのとのくるまにはなほのりぬべし思ひのうちに入らぬ身なれば²¹

This pair of poems refers to the parable of the burning house from the *Lotus Sutra*. Masahira’s allusion implies that Akazome had freed herself from human bonds (leaving in the vehicle) while he was left

²⁰ Quoted and discussed in Akiyama Ken, “*Rekishī monogatari no kenkyū no tame ni*,” *Rekishī monogatari kōza* (Kazama Shobō, 1997), 1:40-41.

²¹ Poem 102 and 103, *AESZ* p. 83.

pinning for her, burning from the attachments of this world. Yet Akazome's preface to his poem points out that he composed his poem upon seeing her leave in another man's carriage, though she was actually just going off to work. Masahira did not, then, believe that she was leaving to become a nun. He was simply jealous.

Masahira's allusion works well in playing with the context and in expressing his complaint, but it seems rather glib for the content. My reaction probably stems from the prevailing, modern attitudes to religious diction. Like words of love, spiritual rhetoric has earned a special place; even though we may have doubts about its sincerity, it is still often understood as a privileged vocabulary that should flow from the heart. Masahira is not being insincere here, but his primary intent is not religious. His words are not some deep-rooted expression of Buddhist faith. His poem reveals instead how such diction could be a part of the playfulness of *waka*. He almost seems to be poking fun at Akazome's religious devotion.

Indeed, partly from such poetry, Akazome has a reputation of being a devout practitioner of Buddhism. Her response is more serious. She seizes the parable's metaphor of salvation and declares that she might indeed be better off in severing her ties to him and the human world, since his lack of fidelity has caused her much distress. Still, does the poem in itself demonstrate exceptional faith? It certainly did not require specialized knowledge of the *Lotus Sutra*. Both poems then raise the question of faith behind such expressions and allusions.

Akazome's prolific composition of *shakkyōka* has supported characterizing her as someone of deep Buddhist beliefs. She is arguably one of the foremost versifiers of this genre. Poems 427 to 454 in *Akazome Emon shū* comprise her set of the *Hokekyō nijūhappō no uta* 法華經二十八品の歌. Though most of her references are conventional, to compose a whole set was a rare feat. The only other complete sets from her time that survive are those by Daisaiin Senshi 大齋院選子 (964-1035), Kintō, and Fujiwara no Nagayoshi 長能 (born in 949).²² Akazome also composed ten poems (455-463 with 308 from the *ihon*) on the metaphors for the human body, taken from the second chapter of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (*Yuimakyō jūyu* 維摩經十喻). From this period, apart from Akazome, only Kintō left complete *waka* cycles based on these two sutras.

While we have no reason to doubt Akazome's faith, we should keep in mind that there may have been other motivations beyond the expression of religious beliefs. For example, some of these poems, as I have noted, may have had their origins in specific occasions such as the memorial services for Senshi or other rites sponsored by Michinaga, who was almost fanatical in his pursuit of Buddhist rituals. The exchange with Masahira also shows that the Buddhist vocabulary and images could have simply been another discourse to master and to employ in *waka*. In this respect, Akazome's fame in proxy poems, screen

²² See Edward Kamens, *The Buddhist Poetry of the Great Kamo Priestess: Daisaiin Senshi and Hosshin Wakashū* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1990), pp. 36-37.

poems, and *shakkyōka* can all be seen as part of her repertory as a professional poet. Just as an actor may enjoy trying different types of roles as a challenge to one's artistry, or as a strategy to avoid being typecast, her anthology shows Akazome exploring and playing with multiple voices, using whatever language the context demanded. Because Akazome is believed to have compiled her collection by herself, perhaps with the help of a daughter, we can understand that the portrait we are given through her anthology is the one she wished to leave behind as her legacy. As Murasaki observes, Akazome was not a genius, but her work demonstrates the range of expression available to women, especially when they dedicated their entire adult lives to poetry, as she did.