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## Ono no Komachi: Love and Desire

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### **Ono no Komachi: Love and Desire**

The poetry of Ono no Komachi can be read in many lights. The two ways in which I feel its message and context can be best appreciated are through feminine independence and masculine subjection. Ono no Komachi wrote poetry that was evocative of the feminine ideal of longing for a male, but she also wrote poetry which denigrated the need for a woman to rely on a male. Through a self-critical reader analysis of some of her poems, I will show that Komachi's poetry can be read as comprising a longing for the world of men, and men in particular, in the earlier part of her life, and a longing for meaning or purpose in the latter portion of her life.

The reason that I find Ono no Komachi's poetry to be effective in conveying her dual longings is because of her utilization of imagery. When she is writing about sexual longing she uses phrases which translate to:

From my yearning the embers of my love  
Send sparks leaping in my breast,  
Setting my heart aflame.<sup>1</sup>

Komachi longs for her lover not only in the abstract poetical form, but in the intense bodily reactions to the lack of her lover in the bed. Passion is a tool in Komachi's poetry, both to rouse it in others as well as to document her own spiraling feelings. Her heart is not merely aflame, her entire poem/body pulses with the desire she feels, and you can sense that through the choice of associations. In each one of these lines there is a mention of fire and burning: "embers", "sparks", "aflame". The culmination of the heat

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.shef.ac.uk/japan2001/waka0750.shtml>

of embers sparking the tinder of her heart inflames her and makes of her very body a flame. Therefore, not only can Komachi be aflame, but a flame. In this translation Komachi's poetry provides context for her love and of her body as a beacon of light for wayward lovers to find her once again. In another translation of this very same poem, the final three lines are translated as follows:

I rise in longing—  
My breast pounds, a leaping flame,  
My heart is consumed in fire. (Keene, 78)

The choice of the word “consumed” here offers a very different version of Komachi. In this treatment it seems more as if her longing will not only create a fire in her, but it will destroy her. Lack of consummation will consume her, thus leaving her heart with nothing—it will be burned completely and be no more. A third translation expressed this even more concretely, “While within me my heart chars,”<sup>2</sup> as the final line, or a final translation of the closing line, “My heart burns up.”<sup>3</sup>

In a way, Komachi's love can be read as a danger to her self. Not so much her bodily self as her sense of self, being entirely engrossed in the quest to find and mate, she is missing out on many other things which the world might have to offer her. The percentage of her poetry which is spent in dream-time wanderings and imagining suggests that she spends more time in an illusionary world than the real one. One of the poems that best showcases her use of dreams as both an escape and a solution is the following:

Since encountering  
my beloved as I dozed,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gotterdammerung.org/japan/literature/ono-no-komachi/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://bopsecrets.org/rexroth/translations/japanese.htm#Women%20Poets%20of%20the%20Classic%20Era>

I have come to feel  
that it is dreams, not real life,  
on which I can pin my hopes.<sup>4</sup>

She has spent so much time thinking about this nebulous “beloved” that she begins to dream about him also, and to even purposefully set out to dream about him.<sup>5</sup> In another translation of this poem, she claims that “It is dreams that / Have begun to comfort me.”<sup>6</sup> She will “pin her hopes” on the dream and that will “comfort” her as the reality of her love is that she never sees the beloved in the flesh. Either this could mean that her life is secluded and she cannot physically see him, or it could also mean that her beloved is a fanciful image that she carries around with her and that he doesn’t really even exist.

Eventually, however, through her poetry you can begin to sense that even dreaming is not going to be able to fulfill the need for Komachi. She becomes morose and increasingly introspective in some of her other poems. The notable one, of course, is:

The flowers withered,  
Their color faded away,  
While meaninglessly  
I spent my days in the world  
And the long rains were falling. (Keene, 81)

In this poem, Komachi expresses a fixation on her old age and coming death, which was a large part of the Japanese culture—a fixation on the intransient life. Admittedly, it’s a part of any culture wherein human beings all grow old and die, however in Heian Japan with nothing better to occupy their time, people could wax poetical on the subject of growing old and never tire of attempting to romanticize it. In this poem by Komachi she compares herself and her beauty to a flower that has withered, to colors which have faded

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<sup>4</sup> <http://govschl.ndsu.nodak.edu/~egleave/poetry/tanka.html>

<sup>5</sup> In one dream, she claims that she will put her robe on inside out, a tradition which was supposed to result in dreaming about one’s love.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.shef.ac.uk/japan2001/waka0591.shtml>

as she has grown older and her youth has passed. A bit of self conceit is certainly involved in this high opinion of her former glory, but it was also an aspect of the Japanese cultural ideal at the time to be beautiful and attractive; as it was the only commodity that woman had to trade in the patriarchal court system where females were kept pampered and protected by powerful men. Also, legend has it that Komachi was one of the foremost beauties of her age, as can be seen in the Noh plays which were subsequently written about her. Komachi does however mock herself a little in this poem by saying that it is her own fault for letting time slip through her fingers in idle contemplation and meaningless, petty court activity, and perhaps pointless dreaming for a man that never comes. The rain, of course, is evocative of tears falling at this woman's sorrow for a past that she will never see again. The poem could also be read as a complaint of loneliness from a woman who has grown old and lost her beauty; who is now alone at the ending of her life because she didn't take proper advantage of her beauty while she had it to attach herself to someone else who could provide company in old age. Within a court system of expected extramarital dalliances true love was difficult to find and thus the poem also perhaps expresses a desire for something which the poetess never experienced, but always longed for.

This next poem seems to imply, however, that Komachi was never looking for a male to provide conjugal bliss:

Doesn't he realize  
that I am not  
like the swaying kelp  
in the surf,

where the seaweed gatherer  
can come as often as he wants.<sup>7</sup>

Seaweed is a Japanese pillow-word used to indicate the idea of a married couple who twine together like kelp in the sea. Their fronds wave to and fro under the water, but are always united at the base. In this poem, Komachi indicates that she is “**not** / like the swaying kelp,” and that she will not be what a “seaweed gatherer” is looking for, come he ever so often, she will not allow herself to be picked by him. The effectiveness of this poem lies in its use of a common theme word known to the Japanese readers of this poetry. The contrast between this poem and the previous one though seems to indicate that something is missing. She does not want marriage, but she also is disappointed by what she has to show of her life.

The last poem that I would like to analyze may serve to provide a further outlet for the wasted life syndrome having been dependent on men who ultimately could not provide her what she was looking for. I wrote in the beginning that Komachi could be read as a poet who portrayed women as defined by want for the male and women as defined in the lack of a male; in the search for something more. The poems I have quoted thus far show Komachi’s desire and longing for a male in all its passion and dreaming neuroses, and also the desire of the woman to have something to show for her life as dissipating beauty and no marriage or true love has surfaced. In conclusion then I’d like to present my take on the following poem:

Blossoms blooming  
Yet making no seed are

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<http://bopsecrets.org/rexroth/translations/japanese.htm#Women%20Poets%20of%20the%20Classic%20Era>

The sea-god's  
Garlanded  
Whitecaps offshore.<sup>8</sup>

This poem in translation can most likely be read several ways, but a reading that I would take away from it is that it is about impotent males. The waves pound the shore but produce no seed. The effectiveness of each one of these poems is contingent on what one knows of Japanese culture and, more importantly, how good of a translation one is reading. It's absolutely impossible for me to be definitive on the actual intention that spurred these poems for this woman in the 9<sup>th</sup> century because so little is known about her life. Is it likely that this poem is about a low sperm count? Probably not, but that is what I would take away from it because it provides another strand in my conception of Ono no Komachi's life as a legend. Maybe one thing that she never had was a child. Maybe she became old and died alone haunted not only by the ghosts of guard captains but also by the children that she never had, the life she never lived. Ultimately the effectiveness of Komachi's poetry is its ability to inspire in the reader a vision of Komachi as an actual person with cares and woes, loves and longings.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.shef.ac.uk/japan2001/waka0809.shtml>

### **Confucian Opposites: Foils in *Chin P'ing Mei***

*Chin P'ing Mei* uses its characters as foils to display a microcosm of the greater society and its breakdown of traditional Confucian values. Two characters that can be seen as embodying this and being played off against one another are Hsi-men Ch'ing and Ch'en Wen-chao, the prefect of Tung-p'ing. On the one hand, Hsi-men Ch'ing stands for a ruler who does not follow the Confucian system and whose life and kingdom fall apart horrendously, and on the other hand, Ch'en Wen-chao embodies all that is correct as a ruler and leads the ideal reciprocal life. By comparing these two characters one can see that *Chin P'ing Mei* advocates the Confucian ruler over the licentious ruler who does everything to excess and does not practice propriety or humaneness.

In Confucian terms, the legitimation of a benevolent, or good, ruler is his actions towards those he rules. Hsi-men Ch'ing proves to be a bad ruler because he does not provide a good example to his wives, underlings, or friends. David Roy in his introduction to this translation states that:

...the force of moral example moves downward from the apex of the social pyramid, and that if the leaders of the society...do not exercise their moral responsibility to cultivate their own virtue and set a good example...the inevitable result will be the collapse of the social order. (Roy, xxvi)

This “collapse” is due to the fact that those under the ruler will know no better than to follow his example. An excellent indication of this is when Hsi-men Ch'ing's wife, Pan Chin-lien commits adultery on her husband with the servant boy. Not only had the behavior been seemingly approved of when she first committed adultery with Hsi-men Ch'ing against her original husband, but she also is aware of the women outside of the home that Hsi-men Ch'ing sleeps with in the licensed quarters and even next door. The

author, in referencing the next door neighbors states that if a man practices, “Insensate dissipation, and / unrestrained license; / for such a man to hope that his wife would not get other ideas into her head was futile indeed,” (Roy, 284). This next door neighbor is one of Hsi-men Ch’ing’s friends with whom he goes to the licensed quarters frequently, and Hsi-men Ch’ing also sleeps with his wife. Hsi-men Ch’ing’s example to his wives is thus lacking in any restraint when it comes to sex, so how is that he could expect Pan Chin-lien to remain faithful to him? Yet, he does apparently think that she will as evidenced by his towering rage when he discovers her infidelity. As for Pan Chin-lien herself, she seems to see nothing wrong in it and nothing wrong with lying to her husband about having done it. In fact, not only Pan Chin-lien, but also the servant boy care nothing for the ethical taboos they are breaking, due in consequence to the example which Hsi-men Ch’ing has provided them. As they couple:

One of them shows total disregard  
for ethical norms or distinctions of status;  
The other does not discriminate between  
above and below or high and low.  
One of them, inspired by perverse lustful daring,  
cares nothing for the severity of her husband;  
The other, carried away by lecherous desires,  
ignores a clear-cut violation of the law. (Roy, 232-233)

The things that the two show no regard for: ethics, status, the institution of marriage, the law, these are all things which Hsi-men Ch’ing also shows a flippant attitude towards. He will chase anything in tiny shoes regardless of her status or whether or not she is already married. He flouts the law and uses his money and status to pressure district magistrates and prefects. It goes to show that if he does all that, why should the people in his household be any different. The Confucian value of respecting your ruler because he

shows you respect does not exist in this microcosm of society and in its lack, one can see what a terrible breakdown of the system will occur.

In Hsi-men Ch'ing's case, he dies from excessive sexual activity, and his son whose name means Filial Piety, is taken away to become a Buddhist monk, thus renouncing the world and the family name, (Roy, xxxiv). This is a key point in the Confucian tradition, that children will respect their elders and also count as sacred the hair and flesh that they inherited from said parents. By becoming a Buddhist, the child will shave his head and not continue the family lineage—there will be no one to worship the ancestors and thus the family ends in ignominy.

Hsi-men Ch'ing did not provide a good example to his household. He did not cultivate his personal life to achieve humaneness as Confucius says in the *Analects*, the way to achieve propriety and humaneness is when you “Do not watch what is improper. / Do not listen to what is improper. / Do not speak improperly. / Do not act improperly.”<sup>9</sup> Hsi-men Ch'ing did none of these things; he wasted his life in profligate abuses and licentious over-dosing. His personal life was hardly cultivated as he would merely do whatever struck his fancy at any given time and did not take charge of his household. Thus he failed in cultivating his life to achieve good, and in so doing, he provoked chaos. Confucius wrote in *The Great Learning* that, “When the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated. / When the family is regulated, the state will be in order. / When the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world.”<sup>10</sup> Hsi-men Ch'ing could hardly control himself, there was no way he could exert order on his family and this is what caused the calamitous fissure in the microcosmic society of this family. The lack of

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.praxeology.net/confucius.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Confucian values was the impetus for family downfall. *Chin P'ing Mei* provides by example in the case of Hsi-men Ch'ing how society should **not** behave, while in the case of Ch'en Wen-chao, the novel provides Hsi-men Ch'ing's antithesis—an example which should be followed.

Ch'en Wen-chao was an “official of absolute integrity,” (Roy, 190). In the introductory stanzas of Ch'en Wen-chao the man is proved a paragon by juxtapositions; he is “correct and upright,” “worthy and perspicacious,” loyal and filial,” “humane and kind,” “father and mother,” “worthy and good,” “square and proper,” (Roy, 190-191). “Common people” and “elders” “sing his praises” and “extol his virtues”, (Roy, 191). The man is beloved by the people and he is held in awe because he exemplifies the Confucian values which the society should hold dear. He has read the classics, he practices humaneness and propriety, is filial, and is the benevolent ruler whose rule provides an exemplary example to follow. Thus, the microcosm of society in this instance of the book is one where there is reciprocity of Confucian values between the ruler and the ruled.

Ch'en Wen-chao can be seen as a foil for Hsi-men Ch'ing because he provides a wonderful counterexample in the Confucian model which Hsi-men Ch'ing is so sorely lacking. Ch'en Wen-chao is also the prefect who saves Wu Sung from the death penalty after Hsi-men Ch'ing has managed to orchestrate his arrest and imprisonment. Wu Sung is the character one feels the most sympathy for in this book as it is his brother who was killed by Hsi-men Ch'ing and Pan Chin-lien, and it is Wu Sung who eventually returns and enacts vengeance on this family by killing Pan Chin-lien, the beginning of the end for the wastrel microcosm.

In a way, this story is a sort of reverse of the typical structure of the novel where the writing follows the protagonist. In *Chin P'ing Mei* the story follows the antagonist in order to display more fully by counterexample how one should not be. The protagonist in the story is Wu Sung who will bring order through his quest for fraternal piety by destroying the disorder of Hsi-men Ch'ing's family structure. Ch'en Wen-chao is a character in the earlier pages of the book who helps Wu Sung to the current and future detriment of Hsi-men Ch'ing, while at the same time he himself is an example in contrast to Hsi-men Ch'ing's lascivious life. *Chin P'ing Mei* works as a novel to reverse engineer a failing society. It holds up to view the depredations in social order caused by the breakdown of traditional relationships as espoused by Confucians, in order to instruct the literate public in a revival of classic norms of behavior. Hsi-men Ch'ing can therefore be seen not only as a characterization of the emperor of the time, but also as a foil to the author's ideal Confucian ruler and family/social structure as personified in the character of Ch'en Wen-chao.

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