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Janine Beichman. *Embracing the Firebird: Yosano Akiko and the Birth of the Female Voice in Modern Japanese Poetry.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002. x + 337 pp. $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2347-4; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2208-8.

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Unveiling Yosano Akiko

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Discussions on gender politics within modern Japanese poetry have only just scratched the surface. Janine Beichman's *Embracing the Firebird* will undoubtedly be an important contribution to this field. It is at once a magnificent biography of the less discovered early years of the poet Yosano Akiko (1879-1942), at the same time that it is a critical examination of the poet's renowned text *Untangled Hair* (*Midaregami*, 1901), hailed as one of the cornerstones of Japanese Romanticism and an exemplary work of modern Japanese tanka.

The book, which takes its title from one of Akiko's poems, is organized into four sections. The first three sections (nine chapters) are devoted to the life of Yosano Akiko, beginning with her birth in 1879 until the publication of her seminal work *Untangled Hair* in 1901. The first section covers the childhood of Akiko (1878-1888), the second her adolescence (1889-1900), and the third and largest section in the book, her love affair with Yosano Tekkan (1873-1935), the founder of the journal *Myojo* (*Venus*) and her future husband, and her achievement of becoming one of the most celebrated Japanese poets of the modern era (1900-1901). The fourth and last section (three chapters) examines the poems in *Untangled Hair* itself, offering formalistic analyses and other observations on the collection.

Beichman's main goal is to argue against what she calls the "Tekkan's ribcage" theory–the oversimplified yet dominant understanding of Yosano Akiko, as a poet, according to which she would not have come into play without the support of her husband Yosano Tekkan, editor of the journal *Myojo*, and one of the most important writers of "new style poetry." Surprisingly, one of the main contributors to this narrative was none other than Akiko herself, who claimed in one of her later works that she had never thought of writing poetry until reading one of Tekkan's poems in *Yomiuri shinbun* (p. 74). According to Beichman, Akiko and contemporary male critics made it seem as if her poetic euphony was a sudden event in her life, but in truth, her blossoming was a slow process starting in her childhood through her encounter with the poets of *Myojo*. By strictly focusing on the early years of the poet's life, Beichman sheds light on how Akiko actually attained her poetic voice, even before she met Tekkan.

>From the descriptions of the "sleepy town" of Sakai, Akiko's birthplace, to the minute details of Akiko's and Tekkan's poetic exchanges, Beichman creates a sense of actually living right beside the poet. The biography is very well researched, as the author uses everything ranging from the poet's literary pieces, such as her poems and autobiographical writings, to recent interviews with the poet's relatives, in order to weave together Akiko's story. Beichman portrays Akiko as a girl who went through a sense of alienation even from childhood, and then through her love of both Japanese and Chinese classics, until she developed her own literary talents, finally falling in love with Tekkan and composing her first anthology *Untangled Hair*.

Throughout the biography, we are also introduced to the early works of Yosano Akiko, many of which were omitted from her later anthologies. Beichman, a well-established translator and a haiku poet herself, succeeds in rendering Akiko's often obscure poems into elegant and precise English. She makes an effort to keep the original order of the Japanese and takes into consideration the often uneven spacing between the lines in the original poems. The poems are first presented in English, then followed by romanized Japanese. The original Japanese versions can be found in the appendix.

Readers will appreciate Beichman's careful treatment of Akiko's texts. Beichman does not simply essentialize the speaker of the poems as the voice of Yosano Akiko, the author herself. She argues against Japanese schol-

ars like Satake Kazuhiko and Itsumi Kumi, who read the female subjects constructed in the poems as realistic women. Although she is using the poems for biographical purposes, she is careful not to reduce the multiple voices of Akiko's literary works simply to that of the author's. Beichman composes her narrative by meticulously negotiating between reading the poems as reflections of Akiko's own life and reading them as texts with multiple significations. Her point is not to say that Akiko's poems are simply autobiographical, but rather that reading them against the poet's own background adds another layer to the complexity of her poems.

Recent feminist scholarship on modern Japanese tanka has shown how the poetic expressions and achievements of Meiji and Taish women's tanka were often controlled and manipulated by the male poets and the scholars of their time.[1] In the latter section of the book, Beichman endeavors to free Yosano Akiko from these constraints by re-reading the poems in *Untangled Hair*, which is often too easily criticized for owing its poetic imagination to Akiko's male contemporaries like the writer Shimazaki Tson.

Beichman is obviously very well versed in both classical and modern poetic terminology, and her strength as a scholar of Japanese poetry manifests itself most strongly in the chapters devoted to her discussion of *Untangled Hair*, where she offers new insights into our understanding of the poems in the collection. She even creates her own terminology to explain the creativity of Akiko's poems. Her idea in chapter 11 of what she calls "the mutable speaker"–a speaker who shifts his/her identity within a single poem–is fascinating, as Yosano Akiko's poems are often thought to be composed of one single voice. In the same chapter, she even undertakes the task of explaining how exactly the anthology is organized, a task that none has yet undertaken. She carefully analyzes the poet's methods in connecting and organizing the entire collection, showing what the ordering owes to haikai and renga methods.

Perhaps the most interesting idea for scholars of modern Japanese poetry comes from Beichman's idea of "shimpi" and "the palimpsestic effect." "Shimpi"–a word often used by Akiko–refers to a sense of mystery created by Akiko in her poetry. Similar to the poetic term "ygen," it creates a sense of depth in the poem and connotes a sense of ambiguity that results from the poem's asymmetry, ellipses, and numerous allusions (p. 202). Related to this, "the palimpsestic effect" refers to the collage effect created by Akiko's "mingling of traditions and associations" (p. 8). In chapter 10, Beichman reveals how Akiko's imageries, heretofore understood to be borrowed from "Japanese tradition," actually owes a lot to the iconology of Western paintings, in particular to that of the Renaissance painter Titian. Beichman briefly traces the history of Western nudes in Meiji Japan, then shows how these nudes and other Western romantic motifs like cupids and nymphs manifest in *Untangled Hair*, creating layers of allusions and significations.

It is only because these theories are captivating that these sections would have benefited through expansion. Beichman does a wonderful job in releasing Akiko from the image of being "traditional" and showing the hybridity in her texts, going as far as to say that an image like a butterfly in Akiko's poems "suggests a Pre-Raphaelite or art nouveau image more than anything in Japanese tradition" (p. 210). A brief analysis of how the concept of "West" and Westernization fit into Akiko's own vision of modernity and the role of modern poetry would have enriched the discussion in the chapter about the Western themes found in *Untangled Hair*. More specifically, this would have shed light upon the notion of love that was perhaps the most important concept for the poets of *Moyjo* and Yosano Akiko herself. Beichman states that "*Untangled Hair* became a major chapter in the formation of the idea of love in twentieth-century Japan" (p. 206), but she does not distinguish between the idea of romantic love that was imported from Western literature in the early Meiji era and the idea of love that is found in classical anthologies like the *Kokinsho* (*Anthology of Ancient and Modern Poems*). Discussing how Akiko viewed these differences and used them in her poetry would have tied together nicely with her use of Western nudes and eroticism in her tanka.

J. Thomas Rimer has already expressed that Beichman's work strictly focuses on the early years of the poet and does not mention anything about the trips to Europe that Akiko undertook in her later years.[2] Readers must understand that Beichman's reasons for focusing strictly on the early years of Akiko's life are very important and convincing, while writing about the poet's entire life is completely beyond the scope of the book. Since the book already discusses Akiko's passions for Western art and literature that played such a key role in her poetry, however, a brief hint of how this would later lead into the poet's voyages abroad would have added to the conversation.

Beichman also offers other intriguing observations, such as her analysis of the gendered voice in Akiko's poetry. The "female voice" in the title appears to have a double connotation, as it implies both the blossoming of

Akiko into a poet and her attainment of a poetic voice, as well as the manipulation of gender and voice in her poetry itself. Akiko often shifted from deploying male voices to the more ambiguous omniscient, finally experimenting with multiple female voices within her poetry. The women depicted in her poems were clearly distinct from those of her contemporary male poets, for they had a clear authorial voice within the texts and were portrayed as strong beings. Beichman does a wonderful job of analyzing the multiplicity of voices in Akiko's writings, and she views Akiko's poetry as an important part of early Japanese feminism, as she writes: "itching to prove that women could be men's equals, she [Akiko] made her battleground poetry" (p. 65). Because this idea fits right in with Akiko's position in the famous "bosei hogo" (Motherhood Protection) debates with her contemporary, Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971), it may have been interesting to hear more about the ties between Akiko's poetry and her later feminist writings. An examination of how Akiko's early experiments with the narrative voice contributed to her later feminism would have fit in nicely with Beichman's other observations, especially at the end of chapter 2, when the author discusses the significance of the idealized mother image in Akiko's poems, or in chapter 4, where she examines Akiko's experiments with the speaking subject. Again, however, this would have been beyond the scope and the biographical era that the book was covering, and Beichman's readings of the poems will still be useful for scholars of Japanese feminism, for they show how poetry truly was Akiko's weapon and "battleground" for her feminist thought.

Overall, Beichman's book offers a solid understanding of Yosano Akiko's goals and talents as a modern poet and will prove to be an important work for any scholar of Japanese Romanticism and modern poetry. Tanka aficionados and poets would also appreciate Beichman's wonderful translations of Akiko's poems, and readers in general will enjoy the author's elegant way of narrating the poet's life, as well as her insights into the part of life that the poet herself wanted to erase. *Embracing the Firebird* will leave the readers wanting to know more about the mysterious, complex figure of Yosano Akiko and will make them appreciate her poetry on a whole new level.

Notes

[1]. Akitsu Ei, for example, examines the impact of male scholars' poetic criticism on women's modern poetry in the twentieth century in her *Orikuchi Shinobu no jokaron* (*Orikuchi Shinobu's Criticism of Women's Poetry*) (Gory shoin, 2001); see esp. pp. 103-128.

[2]. J. Thomas Rimer, "*Embracing the Firebird*: A Review," =<http://www.thejapanpage.com/html/columns/Detailed/48.shtml>

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