

Classic Poetry Series

Ihara Saikaku

- 1 poems -

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Ihara Saikaku (1642 - September 9 1693)

Ihara Saikaku was a Japanese poet and creator of the "floating world" genre of Japanese prose (*ukiyo-zōshi*). He was a man of many talents. Not only did he have a penchant for poetry, but he had a gift for writing edgy plays and novels with a radical flair. His name is Ihara Saikaku, and he was a 17th century Japanese writer known for taking risks in his works. Ihara Saikaku was born Hirayama Togo in Osaka in 1642, and little is known about his early life. Despite sketchy personal details, Saikaku's reputation as a novelist, poet and playwright who was the toast of Genroku-era Osaka is unquestionable.

We know that his wife died young and left him with a blind daughter, who also passed away within a few years of her mother. Instead of retiring to a religious sanctuary, which might have been expected at the time, Saikaku chose instead to travel and write. As a result, and unusually for the period, Saikaku experienced different ways of life and saw various parts of the country. Later, he made use of these observations in his work. Whether at home in Osaka or on the road, Saikaku would search out the back alleys and slums, as well as the gay theatres and teahouses. He consorted with beggars, peddlers and prostitutes, flouting the caste system of the day, and later would entertain princes and rich merchants with his literary skill. His written work uniquely captures the cosmopolitan air of Osaka at the time, and the developing *chinindo* (way of the townspeople), which was slowly replacing the *bushido* (way of the warrior).

Saikaku first found recognition as the leading disciple of Soin, a haiku poet, who ran the Danrin school of poetry. Saikaku became the leading exponent of the school in Osaka and worked to free poetry from the conventional rigid forms and restricted themes. He also advocated that it be read in a more natural manner. This radical approach was criticized. The renowned poet Basho commented that Saikaku's poetry was vulgar and uninspired. That did not prevent the traveling wordsmith from gaining quite a following in Osaka, where he was famous for his marathon poetry performances. It is said that at the age of 36, he composed 1600 haiku in a single performance. Three years later it is claimed he produced 3000 in a single day, and then in a day and night recital when he was 43 he composed a staggering 23,500 poems. He was nicknamed the "twenty thousand master."

Saikaku later became known for his great skill at story telling. His first novel, published in 1682, "A Man Who Loved Love," is the story of a man who roamed the countryside making love to scores of women and boys. It was also the first *ukiyo-zōshi* (tale of the "floating world," compared to the more commonly known *ukiyo-e*, pictures of the same theme). He followed it with other picaresque stories with similar erotic themes, such as "Five Women Who Loved Love," "The Comrade Loves of the Samurai," and his later series

of tales "Mirror of Manly Love." Saikaku gained the reputation of having an enormous appetite for the wonders of the wider world and was given the nickname oranda Saikaku (Holland Saikaku). There is little evidence to suggest that he actually had any dealings with the Dutch. More likely the name was intended as a slur signifying his nonconformity.

In 1693 Saikaku died at the peak of the Genroku period, having set the standard for ukiyo-zoshi and giving the next generation of writers, such as Ejima Kiseki, a new level of literary maturity to live up to. Reading Saikaku's two dozen works of fiction today, it is hard to imagine that the floating world of pleasures he so vividly evokes has long since drifted away.

Works:

Publications

The Life of an Amorous Man (□□□□ Kōshoku Ichidai Otoko?, 1682)
The Great Mirror of Beauties: Son of an Amorous Man (□□□□□□□□□□
Kōshoku Nidai Otoko Shoen Okagami ?, 1684)
Five Women Who Loved Love (□□□□ Kōshoku Gonin Onna?, 1685)
The Life of an Amorous Woman (□□□□ Kōshoku Ichidai Onna?, 1686)
(made into the 1952 movie The Life of Oharu by Kenji Mizoguchi)
The Great Mirror of Male Love (The Encyclopedia of Male Love) (□□□□
Nanshoku Okagami?, 1687)

Townspeople (□□ chōnin) stories

Twenty Cases of Unfilial Children (□□□□□ Honchō Nijū Fukō?, 1686)
The Eternal Storehouse of Japan (□□□□ Nippon Eitaigura?, 1688)
Reckonings that Carry Men Through the World or This Scheming World
(□□□□□ Seken Munazan'yō?, 1692)

Warrior stories

Transmission of the Martial Arts (□□□□□ Budō Denraiki?, 1687)
Tales of Samurai Honor (□□□□□ Buke Giri Monogatari?, 1688)

A Sake Barrel

A sake barrel,
Born without hands, makes merry —
Cherry blossom time.

Ihara Saikaku