

Classic Poetry Series

**Sugawara Takesue no
Musume
- poems -**

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Sugawara Takesue no Musume(1009 - 1070)

This author's name means "daughter of Sugawara no Takasue"; she was born in Kyoto but raised in the east when her father was an assistant governor. In *Sarashina nikki* she tells her story from age 12 to about age 52. Until she was about 30, she tells us, she did little but read tales like Murasaki Shikibu's "Menji monogatari"; then for about five years she was at court as an attendant to a princess. When she was about 36, she married and had several children. Once married, she was free to travel, and her pleasure in making pilgrimages and seeing natural landscape seems to have taken the place of her earlier escape into tales. When she was about 49, her husband died, and she started to take more seriously the Buddhism she had until then treated lightly. The meaning of the traditional title of *Sarashina nikki* isn't clear: *Sarashina* is the name of a province referred to in one of the poems (and the subject of a legend of an old woman abandoned by her relatives), but the word itself is not used in the memoir.

In addition to *Sarashina nikki*, Sugawara Takasue no Musume is credited with having written two monogatari. The two tales were attributed to her by Fujiwara Teika, a major literary figure and one usually reliable in his attributions. Recent studies support Teika's attribution, but even today some believe that she wrote only one or the other of the works. The problem for scholars is that the two tales, *Yowa no Nezame monogatari* and *Hamamatsu Chunagon monogatari*, are quite different from one another.

The more interesting of the two attributed works, *Yowa no Nezame* (Wakefulness at night), originally consisted of four parts, but the second and fourth are lost, so less than one-half survives, although contemporary criticism gives a good notion of most of the plot. *Nezame* is unusual because of its focus on character. It contains relatively little action; it deals almost exclusively with the characters' thoughts and feelings.

The tale tells of the life of *Nezame*, daughter of a retired prince: she is made pregnant by her sister's fiance, *Chunagon* ("Chunagon" means Middle Counselor), and has his child in secrecy. The first half of the extant work tells something of *Nezame*'s thoughts but deals mostly with those of *Chunagon* and members of her family. The second half of the work focuses more fully on *Nezame*. Here, the Emperor tries to seduce *Nezame*; he is unsuccessful, but *Chunagon* remains suspicious. *Nezame* cares what *Chunagon* thinks, but her greatest concern is for her "honor": people have assumed that she was at least indiscreet in having children by an unknown man, and now they will believe the worst of her---that she had given in to the Emperor, or even that, as rumor had it, her own sister's

death was in some way caused by her.

Hamamatsu Chunagon monogatari (Hamamatsu is a section of Osaka) originally had six chapters; the first has been lost, but we know much of what it contained. The hero, Chunagon, (not the same character as in Nezame) goes to China in search of the reincarnation of his dead father; he finds him, but he also finds and falls in love with a consort of the Chinese emperor. She has Chunagon's child, whom the hero takes back to Japan and raises. In Japan, he searches for and finds the mother and a sister of the Chinese consort; needless to say, he has a romance with the sister. If Nezame has been criticized by some for its narrow plot, Hamamatsu surely makes up for that.

Ah Me! Ah Me!

Ah, me! Ah, me! My weary doom to labour here in the Palace!
Seven good wine-jars have I - and three in my province.
There where they stand I have hung straight-stemmed gourds of the finest -
They turn to the West when the East wind blows,
They turn to the East when the West wind blows,
They turn to the North when the South wind blows,
They turn to the South when the North wind blows.
And there I sit watching them turning and turning forever-
Oh, my gourds! Oh, my wine-jars!

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I Yearn For A Tranquil Moment

I yearn for a tranquil moment
To be out upon the sea of harmony,
In that enchanted boat.
Oh, boatman, do you know my heart?

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

In The Dead Of Night

In the dead of night, moon-gazing,
The thought of the deep mountain affrighted,
Yet longings for the mountain village
At all other moments filled my heart.

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

No Sight Can Be More Autumnal

No sight can be more autumnal
than that of my garden
Tenanted by an autumnal person
weary of the world!

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

Perfume Laden Air

When from the neighbouring garden the perfume-laden air
Saturates my soul with memories,
Rises the thought of the beloved plum-tree
Blooming under the eaves of the house which is gone.

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

Scarce Had My Mind Received

Scarce had my mind received with wonder
The thought of newly fallen snow -
Seeing the ground lie white -
When the scent of Tachibana flowers
Arose from fallen blossoms.

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

This Is The Night

This is the night when in the ancient Past,
The Herder Star embarked to meet the Weaving One;
In its sweet remembrance the wave rises high in the River of Heaven. [39]
Even so swells my heart to see the famous book.

The answer was:

The star gods meet on the shore of the Heavenly River,
Like theirs full of ecstasy is my heart
And grave things of daily life are forgotten
On the night your message comes to me.

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

Years Have Passed

Years have passed and only sounds of waters have come to my ears,
To-day, indeed, I may even count the ripples around the fishing net.

The pattern of the maple leaves in Autumn dyed with the rain -
Beautiful in the deep mountain!

The sound of the mountain brook gives an illusion of rain drops,
Yet the calm of the waning moon shines over all.

Even in our wandering journey,
The lonely moon accompanies us lighting us from the sky,
The waning moon I used to gaze at in the Royal City.

Undying affection!
Can it end at last, overlaid with time
Even as snow covers the land in the Northern Province?

Even a little pebble does not cease to be,
Though pressed under the snow of Hakusan;
So is my affection even though hidden.

Far from towns, in the heart of the mountain,
The cherry blooms, and wastes its blooms away
With none to see.

The outer world of many sorrows
Is not to be forgotten even here.
At the sound of the evening bell
Lonely grows my heart.

Sugawara Takesue no Musume

You Gave Me Words Of Hope

You gave me words of hope, are they not long delayed?
The plum-tree is remembered by the Spring,
Though it seemed dead with frost.

Sugawara Takesue no Musume