

Paragons of Poetry: The Court Ladies of Heian Period Japan
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The Heian Period of Japanese history spanned approximately 794 AD to 1186 AD. The nature of Japanese rule was transitory throughout the years; the shifting power structure of their society saw the capital city relocate frequently when a new family seized power and a new Mikado, or Emperor, rose to prominence. The Heian period began when the capital was moved to Heian-kyo (modern day Kyoto) by the new Mikado. Many historians consider this period of time to be marked by the rise and fall of the powerful Fujiwara family. As the primary prominent family of the time, most Fujiwara men held important offices both in court and regional governance. In fact, the Fujiwara family was so prolific in size, new appointments had to be made up to accommodate all the men. The relative peace during this period "allow[ed] for the growth of a leisure class of nobles...known as *kuge*" (Meissner, *Poetry and Processions: The Daily Life of the Kuge in the Heian Court*). This paper will focus on the lives and contributions of the women of this nobility class.

The role of women in Heian society and court is well-documented in many of their own writings, the most definitive of which were recorded between 1007 AD and some unspecified date after 1021 AD. The latest writer is only known as a daughter of Fujiwara Takasue, and it is unclear when her writings ended, though she lived many years as a lady at court. These writings were compiled and translated in 1920, titled *Diaries of the Court Ladies of Old Japan*. The introduction to the writings, provided by Amy Lowell, gives us this insight:

The Chinese called Japan the "Queen Country," because of the ascendancy which women enjoyed there. They were educated, they were allowed a share of inheritance, and they had their own houses. It is an extraordinary and important fact that much of the best literature of Japan has been written by women. Three of these most remarkable women are the authors of the Diaries.

Ichijo, the Mikado around the time the *Diaries* were written, had two wives named Sadako and Akiko, each of which gathered other ladies around her as her entourage. Many of the court ladies were daughters of Fujiwara family appointees - governors of regional provinces and other such officers. The queens sought to surround themselves not only with women of great beauty, but also women of culture; learned women who could read and write, those with exceptional talent in poetry, prose, and calligraphy, and those who could make beautiful clothing, among other skills. An amicable rivalry developed between the queens to have the finest such ladies among her personal court.

Court life for the ladies was generally divided among two main activities: observance of festivals and religious rituals, and time spent to pursue their various interests. They were

educated in language and poetry styles. The most popular style among the court ladies was the *waka* poem, consisting of 31 syllables. They would also make clothing for themselves and their family, as well as clothing to give as gifts for certain ceremonies or celebrations during the year. The fashions typically consisted of many layers of silk, with special attention paid to color: “[they] delighted in the harmony produced by the colour combinations of silk over silk, or of a bright lining subdued by the tone of an outer robe” (Omori et al., *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*). These would be worn while donning what a modern eye would call intense makeup, including heavy face paint, painted brows, and blackened teeth. Keeping up with the ever-changing fashions of Japanese nobility meant a lady and her attendants would spend a significant amount of time crafting clothing.

While the court ladies largely did not participate in the political landscape of the time, they contributed greatly to the culture. Before becoming a court lady for Queen Akiko, the woman who became known as Murasaki Shikibu wrote *The Tale of Genji*, a fictional novel following the life of Prince Genji. She “depicted real life in [Kyoto] as a contemporary gentleman might have lived it” (Omori et al., *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*), and her work has come to define early Japanese culture, and was no doubt the reason Murasaki was called to be one of the crown jewels among Queen Akiko’s court. Not to be outdone, Queen Sadako’s ladies-in-waiting featured Sei Shonagon, author of *Pillow Book*. Her notable work was somewhat of a diary, written in a less formal, more conversational tone, and is one of the tomes that gives us a deeply personal inside look into the lives of the *kuge* women. Izumi Shikibu, another woman highlighted in *Diaries of the Court Ladies of Old Japan*, is extolled by Amy Lowell as “the greatest woman poet which Japan has had.” She is known for writing many *waka* poems; some counts put her total completed works close to 900 poems.

In addition to beauty and artistic expression, poetry was absolutely essential to courting. Furtive notes passed from a man to a woman would be answered in kind with amicable poetry, whether or not the woman regarded him kindly. Izumi Shikibu’s diary detailed the process of courtship between single men and women among the *kuge*: a man wrote a love poem to the woman of his choice, and if she had regard for him, she would write him a poem returning his affection. He would then visit her in secret, and they would exchange more poems in the days after until the lady introduced the gentleman to her family at a banquet. They would then be free to meet and court one another in the open.

While the strictest of societal norms called for this sort of regimented courtship, the court ladies also entertained many flirtations and love affairs. According to Meissner, “Except for occasional excursions and the necessary ceremonies, she was not supposed to see anyone besides her female attendants, husband, and father. However, promiscuity was an accepted part of the culture of these women and love affairs were expected.” The affairs offered excitement for the ladies and the men of court alike. Secret meetings and surreptitiously exchanged poetry between lovers showcased both the writer’s talent and evocative use of language:

Two or three days passed without a word from him. Her heart was in his promise which gave her hope, but she could not sleep for anxiety. While lying awake in bed, she heard a knocking at the gate. It was just dawn. "What can it be?" she wondered, and sent a servant to inquire. It was the Prince's letter. It was an unusual hour for it and she wondered sorrowfully whether the Prince had been conscious of her emotion. She opened her shutter and read this letter in the moonlight:

*Do you see that the little night opens
And on the ridge of the mountain, serenely bright,
Shines the moon of a night of Autumn?*

The bridge across the garden pond was clearly seen in the moonlight. The door was shut, and she thought of the messenger outside the gate and hastened her answer:

*The night opens and I cannot sleep,
Yet I am dreaming dreams,
And, loving them, the moon I do not see.*

While artful and nuanced, the ladies' writing was not unaffected by the political landscape of their time. During the Heian period, envoys to China brought Chinese culture back to Japan. The influx of Chinese influence reflected in the writing of the time. Men wrote their political, religious, medical, and other documents considered important in Chinese. Seemingly to flaunt their mastery of language, the court ladies came up with a "47 character phonetic alphabet based on the Chinese symbols that sounded most like their own language" (Meissner, *Poetry and Processions: The Daily Life of the Kuge in the Heian Court*). This version of Chinese/Japanese hybrid writing was used to write many influential and historical works, including the previously mentioned *Tale of Genji* and *Pillow Book*.

While the men ruled over the political realm, the documentation we have of the life, history, and culture of Japanese nobility owes much to the time spent by the court ladies creating it. No study of the history of the Heian period is complete or even in full context without considering them. From language and poetry, to fashion and courtship, many important facets of life were the domain of the masterful court ladies of the period.

Works Cited

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