

The Use of Poetic Verse in the *Kōwakamai Fushimi Tokiwa*

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In this paper I discuss the role of *waka* in the narrative of a medieval Japanese tale titled *Fushimi Tokiwa*. I show how *waka* are skillfully woven into the narrative to add to the suspense of an already harrowing tale, as well as add complexity and layers to the narrative. Then, I provide original translations of the *waka* in question and a brief textual analysis. I close by commenting and drawing some conclusions about *Fushimi Tokiwa* and the *kōwakamai* genre as a whole in view of this use of *waka* in the narrative.

Keywords: *waka*, *kōwakamai*, narratology

和歌, 幸若舞, ナラトロジー

The Story

The tale *Fushimi Tokiwa*² tells the story of a young mother Tokiwa-gozen³ as she tries to escape Kyoto with her three young sons after the Heiji conflict⁴ for fear of their lives. Tokiwa's husband, famed warrior of the Genji clan Minamoto no Yoshitomo,⁵ had been executed for his role in the conflict, which was essentially a coup attempt to oust his rival Taira no Kiyomori.⁶ Both Yoshitomo and Kiyomori had helped the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa⁷ maintain control of the throne by helping Go-Shirakawa place his son, Nijō⁸ on the throne after the untimely death of emperor Konoe.⁹ Yoshitomo had felt that his service had been insufficiently rewarded, and directed his ire (whether rightly or wrongly) towards Kiyomori. Despite emerging victorious in the coup, Kiyomori ordered all those loyal to Yoshitomo be put to death, including Yoshitomo's children.

At the time, Tokiwa (who was approximately 21 years old) had three sons with Yoshitomo: Imawaka, Otowaka, and Ushiwaka,¹⁰ whom at the time of the story were all under the age of 8. Hearing that Kiyomori has ordered the

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² 伏見常盤. Sometimes also written as 伏見常葉. For the full text, see: SNKBT 59.

³ 常盤午前, (dates unknown). Although the Yoshitomo came from the renowned Minamoto clan, whose lineage can be traced to emperor Seiwa 清和天皇 (850–881; r. 858–876), Tokiwa's lineage is unclear. The narrative indicates that she may have been born around 1139, but the year of her death is unknown.

⁴ *Heiji no ran* 平治の乱 (1159–1160).

⁵ 源義朝 (1123–1160).

⁶ 平清盛 (1118–1181).

⁷ 後白河院 (1127–1192; reigned 1155–1158).

⁸ 二条天皇 (1143–1165; r. 1158–1165).

⁹ 近衛天皇 (1139–1155; r. 1141–1155).

¹⁰ 今若 (1153–1203), 乙若 (1155–1181), and 牛若 (1159–1189), respectively. Ushiwaka is the childhood name of the warrior who would later be known as Minamoto no Yoshitune 源義経 —the tragic hero of the Genpei Wars (*Genpei gassen* 源平合戦; 1180–1185).

deaths of all Yoshitomo loyalists, Tokiwa takes her sons into the surrounding mountains and into the protection of the forest. Tokiwa, unfamiliar with the wild environs outside the capital quickly gets lost, and to make matters worse, it begins to snow. Just as they are about to succumb to the frosty weather, Tokiwa spots a home deep in the woods. Not knowing whom Tokiwa and the three young boys actually are, the old couple who live in the home take pity on them and allow them to stay in their home for the night. Throughout the course of the night, the old couple's compassion for the struggling travelers grows, and they allow them to stay until the weather improves and it is safe to travel on the mountain paths.

Weeks pass and soon some local village girls catch wind of the mysterious travelers lodging in the old couple's home and decide to pay a surprise visit to see these strangers for themselves. Faced with the possibility of having her identity uncovered and being turned over to Kiyomori, Tokiwa uses her quick wit and concocts a story to tell the nosy girls. Tokiwa tells the girls that she is on the way to her mother's home, fleeing her heartless, philandering husband. The story drives them all to tears, so the old couple suggest some singing and dancing to cheer up the mood. It is here the story ends, with Tokiwa's identity safely concealed and out of Kiyomori's reach.

The Genre

Fushimi Tokiwa is one of approximately 50 tales that compose the genre *kōwakamai*.¹¹ Although *kōwakamai* is distinct from other medieval literary genres, those familiar with history or premodern literature may recognize parts the *Fushimi Tokiwa* synopsis. The following is a brief description of *kōwakamai* and an explanation of why *Fushimi Tokiwa* may sound familiar.

The *Fushimi Tokiwa* text on which this paper is based comes from a printed and bound collection of *kōwakamai* narratives called *Mai no hon*.¹² *Mai no hon* consists of 36 *kōwakamai* tales and was printed once in 1632, and again due to popularity in 1635.¹³ Although the *kōwakamai* tales in *Mai no hon* are meant to be enjoyed as written material,¹⁴ *kōwakamai* were originally performed for audiences as oral tales.¹⁵

As oral narratives, *kōwakamai* were a popular performance art from the Muromachi period (1336–1573) to the early Edo period (early 1600s).¹⁶ Written records detailing how exactly *kōwakamai* was performed and whom exactly its creators were no longer exist. It is known that *kōwakamai* was a combination of instrumental music, chanting narratives, and some form of rudimentary dance. *Kōwakamai* seems to have likely evolved from earlier, more popular performing-arts genres such as *shirabyōshi*, *kusemai*, and *biwa hōshi*.¹⁷ *Kōwakamai* also appears to have a somewhat close relationship with *nō*,¹⁸ which was a contemporary art form, but how *nō* and *kōwakamai* may have influenced, or even competed with each other is vague. Given *nō*'s popularity to this day, suffice it say that *nō* was the more popular of the two.

As mentioned earlier, the plot of *Fushimi Tokiwa* may sound familiar to some. This is because the content of *kōwakamai* narratives are based on earlier historical chronicles and war tales written around the Kamakura era (1185–1333), for example *Soga monogatari* and *Heike monogatari*.¹⁹ In the case of *Fushimi Tokiwa*, its narrative is a

11 幸若舞. There is some debate regarding how many *kōwakamai* tales there were. A conservative count places the number closer to 40.

12 舞の本.

13 SNKBT 59 is a slightly edited, typeset edition of this Edo era *Mai no hon*.

14 *Yomimono* 読み物.

15 *Katarimono* 語り物.

16 See “*Kaisetsu*” in SNKBT 59.

17 白拍子, 曲舞, and 琵琶法師, respectively.

18 能.

19 曾我物語 and 平家物語, respectively.

combination of some episodes from the *Heiji monogatari*²⁰ (which is thought to have been first composed around the late 13th century) and *Gikeiki*²¹ (which is thought to have been written in the early to mid-Muromachi period). *Heiji monogatari* is a war tale²² recounting the events of the Heiji conflict—the conflict is named as such due to the fact that it occurred in the brief period known as the Heiji years (1159–1160). Like the *Heike monogatari*, *Heiji monogatari* was likely performed much in the same way: by blind itinerant minstrels playing a large lute²³ and reciting the epic from memory. As the title *Gikeiki* suggests, it is a war chronicle of Yoshitsune. While its title suggests it is a historical chronicle,²⁴ is generally considered a war tale because of the prose nature of the text rather than it being a strictly written account of historical events. Perhaps there is not much difference between the two genres; however, the style in which the tales were written would vary depending on whether they were meant to be recited or simply serve as written records.

The *Waka*

As is the case with *kōwakamai*, the prose of *Fushimi Tokiwa*'s text does not necessarily stick to a specific rhythm or rhyme pattern. The text is mostly the narrator recounting the story and the occasional dialogue amongst characters. *Fushimi Tokiwa*'s text contains two poems, whose 5-7-5-7-7 syllable rhythm-patterns briefly disrupt the text's flow, but also act as a rather clever plot device.

In general, the term *waka*²⁵ means Japanese poetry. It might sound odd to specify “Japanese” poetry, but one must remember that composing and reading classical Chinese poetry was a part of an educated person's upbringing and a popular pastime in premodern Japan. *Waka* is generally an umbrella term encompassing *tanka*, *chōka*, *sedōka*²⁶ and other forms of poetry. The *waka* that appear in *Fushimi Tokiwa* are composed in the 31-syllable form (with a 5-7-5-7-7 syllable pattern). While many consider this form of poetry to be simply the “*waka* form” others call it *tanka* or “short verse.” Suffice to say, the meanings of both *waka* and *tanka* have undergone change since the time of the earliest collection of Japanese poetry, the *Manyōshū*²⁷ (compiled throughout the mid-8th century), through the age of the first imperial anthology of “Japanese poems,” the *Kokinshū*²⁸ (compiled in the early 10th century, ca. 905), to the present.

Fushimi Tokiwa's base texts, *Heiji monogatari* and *Gikeiki*, do indeed contain multiple *waka* within their narrative structures, too. The specific episodes from the base texts on which *Fushimi Tokiwa* is based, however, do not contain *waka*. Therefore, the inclusion of *waka* in the reiteration of the story is a distinctive characteristic of the *kōwakamai* version. Below are the two *waka*, their translation, and brief analysis. The *waka* are presented here in the order they appear in the text. I have added slashes (/) in the *romaji* transcriptions to show where the syllable-pattern breaks are. Also, while the poems appear as 1-line, in line with the text, I have rendered my English translations into multiple lines. I have also attempted to preserve the 31 syllable form.

Poem 1

木幡山おろす嵐の烈しくて宿りかねたる夜半の月かな

Kohatayama/ orosu arashino/ hageshikute/ yadori kanetaru/ yowa no tsuki kana

20 平治物語. For a Japanese version of the text, see: SNKBT 43. For an English version, see: Tyler (2012).

21 義経記. For a Japanese version, see: NKBT 37. For an English version, see: McCullough (1971).

22 *Gunki-monogatari* 軍記物語.

23 Biwa 琵琶.

24 Ki 記.

25 和歌.

26 短歌, 長歌, and 旋頭歌, respectively.

27 万葉集.

28 古今集.

Harsh and fierce, the winds
 howl down from Mt. Kohata.
 Even for the moon
 in the night sky it's impossible
 to spend the night here.

Poem 2

木幡山裾野の嵐険しくて伏見と聞けど寝られざりけり
Kohatayama/ susono no arashi/ kewashikute/ Fushimi to kikedo/ nerarezarikeri
 At the foot of Mt. Kohata,
 fierce mountain winds howl.
 Known as a place to rest and gaze at the moon,
 there's no way one can sleep.

These poems contain allusions to popular songs that were compiled and published as a collection called *Kanginshū*²⁹ (ca. 1518). In *Fushimi Tokiwa*, lines from *Kanginshū* songs are borrowed and woven into these two waka poems. Unlike the songs on which they are based, the newly composed verses are not sung as entertainment, but rather whispered secretly amongst the characters in order to transmit encoded language between characters in the story.

The Waka and the Narrative

The author of *Fushimi Tokiwa* deliberately selected these two poems and very skillfully wove them into the narrative. The two *waka* appear in a scene when the old couple allow Tokiwa and her children into their home for the night to escape the harsh snowstorm. At first the couple was not going to allow them inside, fearing that Tokiwa was some sort of man-eating monster roaming the night (also, they suspected that the travelers might be fugitives and bring trouble to the village). After hearing Tokiwa recite Buddhist sutras, they decide she must be sincerely in trouble and let her and her children inside.

Once inside, Tokiwa removes her hat and outer robes, giving the old couple a chance to glimpse her delicate form through a crack in the wall dividing their rooms. Knowing that Kiyomori has issued a warning not to help any Yoshitomo loyalists, the couple is afraid to ask who Tokiwa and the boys truly are. Suspecting she must be a lady of high society, the old woman whispers a poem, loud enough for Tokiwa to hear in the next room, “Harsh and fierce, the winds howl down from Mt. Kohata. Even for the moon in the night sky it's impossible to spend the night here” (poem 1).

Tokiwa hears this verse and is surprised that an old couple living in the woods so far removed from the capital could recite such a fine poem. Intrigued, Tokiwa then answers with a verse of her own, “At the foot of Mt. Kohata, fierce mountain winds blow. Known as a place to rest and gaze at the moon; there's no way one can sleep” (poem 2).

Hearing Tokiwa's “response” to their “call,” confirms the couple's suspicions that Tokiwa is indeed from Kyoto and therefore must be a fugitive—though they still do not ask who exactly she is. The reason the couple is sure that she is on the run is because of clues hidden within the verses. As Asahara and Kitahara explain,³⁰ in poem 1 the first part of the verse (which is in a 5-7-5 pattern) explicitly says that “the winds around here [Kohata mountain] are so

²⁹ 関吟集.

³⁰ SNKBT 59, 278, n.1.

fierce and harsh.” What this refers to, however, is not the winds, but the harshness and severity of Kiyomori’s forces. The second half of the verse (patterned as 7-7) explicitly states that “the winds are so strong, not even the moon can stay where it is” (i.e., the winds are blowing the moon out of the sky). What this means is that Tokiwa cannot stay there [because of Kiyomori’s forces]. Tokiwa hears the woman’s verse and understands what the couple is trying to tell her.

In a display of wit, Tokiwa replies with poem 2, which too has encoded meanings in the top and bottom parts. Asahara and Kitahara explain,³¹ the top part of the verse means explicitly, “the fierce winds have been so harsh [on us] here,” but what Tokiwa is really expressing is her initial distress that the old man did not show compassion to her and her sons [at first]. In the bottom part she says explicitly, “this place is known as ‘Fushimi,’ which means a place to lay down and view the moon, but sleep is impossible.” By saying this, Tokiwa communicates the fact that she and her sons are not safe to rest in this otherwise peaceful place.

Since it is based on episodes from two earlier texts, *Heiji monogatari* and *Gikeiki*, which were by all accounts extremely famous and well known texts at the time, audiences would have been familiar with many points of the plot. The inclusion of these *waka*, however, add something new to the telling of the story, giving it more tension and suspense.

Since *waka* typically employ literary devices like poetic allusions to famous places and puns,³² a single *waka*, masterfully written, often has multiple layers of meaning. Therefore, they are perfect for conveying hidden messages between characters in a story, and for adding to the tension in the plot that builds to a climax. The *waka* here were composed using lines and motifs carefully selected from popular *Kanginshū* songs. Thus, the narrator must have been confident that audiences would be familiar with the songs and would be aware of the songs’ hidden themes and messages.

Conclusion

Incorporating *waka* into the *kōwakamai* reiteration of *Fushimi Tokiwa* accomplishes a few things: they further blur the line between truth and fiction in the narrative; they serve to differentiate *kōwakamai* from similar contemporary genres; and they help pull the audience into the suspense.

First, they blur the lines between truth and fiction. By all accounts, the story of Tokiwa-gozen fleeing Kyoto with her sons is historical fact. The Heiji conflict and the major political and military actors involved with it are real events in Japan’s history. Details about Tokiwa’s family heritage are unknown, but her three sons Imawaka, Otowaka, and Ushiwaka all became rather well known people in history—the most famous of whom is Ushiwaka, who became Minamoto no Yoshitsune and was by all accounts a leading figure in the Genpei War. The “facts” and the “fiction” in details like where Tokiwa fled and how she managed to keep her children safe until they became adults are harder to discern. One thing that is certainly “made up” is the dialogue between characters throughout the story. Unless there was a scribe present writing every utterance, audiences must accept that the dialogue is fiction. But what about the *waka*? The *waka* are based on songs from a real book, the *Kanginshū*. Audiences at the time would have known, and probably even sung or memorized songs included in that compilation. The *waka* therefore add bits of real-life to the narrative by connecting the reality in the narrative to the audience’s shared reality.

Second, the *waka* serve to differentiate, ever so slightly, *kōwakamai* from the wars tales and war chronicles. War tales and war chronicles differ in their use of language, prose, purpose, and mode of transmission, or re-telling. *Waka* were certainly a part of public discourse and are found abundantly across literary genres. These two examples of *waka*, however, were not simply copy and pasted from a poetry anthology, but instead were composed specifically

³¹ SNKBT 59, 278, n.5.

³² *Utamakura* 歌枕 and *kakekotoba* 掛詞, respectively.

for the purpose of creating a part of the narrative that only appears in the *kōwakamai* iteration of the Tokiwa tale (not in its two base texts, *Heiji monogatari* and *Gikeiki*).

Finally, the use of the *waka* and their coded language pulls audiences into the story and helps build tension leading to a climax. I have already hinted at this, but it is important because it gives some clues about whom the audiences enjoying *kōwakamai* were. Asahara writes that *kōwakamai* were enjoyed by peasants.³³ If so, then one could reasonably conclude that peasants (despite their lower status in society) did understand and enjoy *waka* and allusions to anthologies like *Kanginshū* to some extent. On one hand this could point to peasants' education, or it could simply indicate how deeply entrenched *waka* were in medieval social discourse.

In closing, although scholars have for a long time avoided carefully analyzing *kōwakamai* and instead turned their attention to *nō*, war tales, war chronicles, and other “high literature,” *kōwakamai* narratives do indeed possess their own literary qualities and intricacies. And, the way *waka* are interwoven into *kōwakamai* narratives indicate not only a level of sophistication possessed by whomever created the tales, but also point to the level of sophistication held by the peasant audiences. Thus not only are *kōwakamai* a valuable part of the medieval literary corpus, but also are important for understanding medieval society.

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³³ *Shomin* 庶民. See, “*Kaisetsu*” in SNKBT 59.