

Bashō on War: Glory or Emptiness?

Selected, translated, and explored by Jeff Robbins

The literary critic Masaoka Shiki established the convention “that poetry should apply... only to nature and leave human affairs to the modern novel.”¹ However two centuries before Shiki, Bashō often explored human affairs in his *tsukeku*, the stanzas he contributed to linked verses. In this article are one nine *tsukeku*, and two prose passages revealing his feelings about war. May these works enter the hearts of people worldwide to become resources in the search for peace. One of Bashō’s most famous haiku was written on the hilltop in the Far North where 500 years before, the hero Yoshitsune and his 16 retainers fought against an army, and Yoshitsune killed his wife and infant daughter then committed ritual suicide before the enemy could defile his life. The haiku appears at a climatic moment in Bashō’s travel journal *Oku no Hosomichi* which I translate as *A Narrow Path in the Heartlands*:

Rank summer grasses
where warriors went to war,
traces of their dreams

Natsu-gusa ya / tsuwamono domo ga / yume no ato

Each year since that epic tragedy came to pass, the various grasses on the neglected hilltop have put forth new shoots, grown tall and coarse in the moist summer, shivered in the chill, and withered in the long frigid winter. Haruo Shirane – who titled his book *Traces of Dreams* from this haiku – says that “*natsukusa* (summer grasses) is both the rich, thick replenished grass of the present, and the blood stained grass of the past, an image both of nature’s constancy and of the impermanence of all things.”² Then “the four successive heavy “o” syllables in *tsuwamonodomo* (plural for warriors) suggest the ponderous march of warriors or the thunder of battle”;³ I have tried to

imitate this military rhythm with repetition of ‘w’ and ‘r’ sounds. Nothing remains of all those men killing each other, however Bashō sees in spirit what is hidden in Time, the traces of dreams lingering among the grasses.

Some believe that this haiku glorifies war, however, as I see it, the verse highlights the futility of war—the vanity of male achievements in comparison to the prolific fertility of summer in the Far North:

I have seen all of the works that are done under the Sun
and behold, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 1: 14

Vanity, vanity, vanity. Men chasing after the wind of self-importance, creating conflicts, sending young men to die, making women and children suffer, all for nothing.

In each tsukeku which follows, the question arises: did Bashō glorify war as men do, or along with women mourn its emptiness?

The Night before a Battle

The poet Koeki begins with a nature scene and Bashō continues with two armies waiting for daylight to allow them to kill each other.

In the cold wind
at sunset, long drawn-out
cries of hawks
**Foretell the heads to fall
in tomorrow's battle**

Kaze samuki yuuhi ni / tobi no koe hikite
Ikusa ni asu no / kubi o uranau

(BRZ 4: 162⁴) Koeki's stanza is magnificent by itself, but even more stunning is the way each element – the wind, the sunset,

the “long drawn-out cries” – feeds energy into Bashō’s ode to Fate. In the link between the stanzas is the horror and cruelty of war. Bashō took the elements Koeki provided and blended them into that great question of existence which can never be answered: Are the future and death ordained? Or are they random?

“Tomorrow strangle!”
goose alive and squawking
into straw bag
**The moon breathtaking,
market for army camp**

Ashita shimen / kari o tawara ni / ike-oite
Tsuki sae-sugoki / jinchuu no ichi

(BRZ 6: 110) Fugyoku imagines a bird fighting against containment while the farmer does not care what the bird wants and is just doing his job. We hear his annoyed and ungrammatical exclamation about tomorrow when the real violence will silence this life. Bashō leaps to another scene which could become violent tomorrow: a military encampment, warriors here to do battle, but under a temporary truce, they wait. While they wait, they have to eat, so a market has sprung up to supply their needs; here the farmer brought the goose to sell. Bashō’s stanza contains no violence, however renku scholar Miyawaki Masahiko explains that the words ‘tomorrow strangle’ regarding the goose “give rise to a feeling of coarse brutality which Bashō applies to the army camp.”⁵ My daughter Jean says, the two stanzas “make each other shine.”

To become a nun?
parting in the night
By moonlight
at him in battle gear
she looks, searching

Ama ni naru beki / yoi no kinuginu /
Tsuki-gake ni / yoroi to yara o / mi sukashite

(BRZ 6: 260) The poet Rotsu conceives a husband leaving to join the troops gathering at night, so early next morning they can go into battle. If he dies, she can only survive as a nun. Bashō complements her grim reality with an environment (moonlight), a masculine and interesting image (the samurai in his armor) and then the double-verb *mi-sagashite*, literally, to “look, searching,” which in both original and translation ends the verse. William Strunk, Jr. in *The Elements of Style*, tells us to “place the emphatic words at the end.”⁶ Thus the double verb emphasizes the woman’s activity and consciousness; the comma between ‘looks’ and ‘searching’ makes the reader pause on line, placing the woman’s stillness in contrast to the movement of her leaving husband. She looks at him, searching to see into the future: the division in the road tomorrow will bring, either the world with him alive, or him dead.

Tomorrow to the enemy
our heads shall be sent
Having Kosanda
hold my cup of sake
one song to sing

Asu wa tataki ni / kubi okurisen

Kosanda ni / sakezuki torase / hitotsu utai

(BRZ 3: 199) Jugo begins with the thoughts of a general: tomorrow is the great battle and they outnumber us, so their swords shall cut off our heads. Miyawaki explains the feeling of Japanese samurai bonding here:

“Kosanda (a name Bashō made up) is my trusted retainer who has followed me for many years. By giving him my cup of sake to hold while I sing, I thank him for his devotion, and our vow to die together tomorrow is all the more refreshing. In ‘one song I sing’ is my feeling that, as I think of death, I have settled without change in my resolution.”⁷

Bashō portrays the general and retainer glorifying war, maintaining with the aid of sake the masculine illusion that

war is the ultimate human activity – but, as we see in the following section, Bashō himself does not concur with this glorification; he transcends the illusion of splendor that men imagine in war.

Seeing through the Illusion

With iron bow
go forth to confront
a brutal world
Tigress at daybreak
yearns to be pregnant

Kurogane no / yumi tori kakeki / yo ni ide yo
Tora futokoro ni / yadoru akatsuki

(BRZ 3: 100) Kikaku begins with an “iron bow” which suggests the Japanese folk tale of Yuriwaka, a general and provincial governor betrayed by a subordinate and abandoned on an island. The subordinate took over his governorship and tried to take over his wife, but she—like Penelope in the *Odyssey*—stalled while praying for the Gods to bring back Yuriwaka. Her prayers reached a fisherman who rescued him, then Yuriwaka took vengeance on his betrayer with his gigantic bow. Elements of the story are so similar to the *Odyssey* that some scholars believe that Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century told the ancient Greek legend to Japanese who made it their own.

Kikaku expresses the masculine fighting for vengeance (or whatever men seek), then Bashō reaches for the ultimate in female power. No sweat little girl, she is a fierce tigress—and the tiger is usually associated with strength, courage, independence, and determination—yet in her bosom, the most intimate part of her body, she creates new life. She joins the Sun-Goddess at daybreak giving birth to the new day.

In the prose passage that concludes his travel journal *Backpack Notes*, Bashō describes the Battle of Ichinotani, in 1184 on the beach at Suma (western Kobe), where the Genji forces led by Yoshitsune, overwhelmed the Heike who had possession of the infant Emperor. The surviving Heike panicked and ran for their boats to escape:

The chaos of that era, the clamor of that day, float upon my heart:

Empress Dowager reverently hugging the Infant,
Royal Mother's legs catching in her royal skirt,
noble folk all tumble onto the cabin boat,
court ladies run back and forth with precious items,
lutes and harps wrapped in cushions and futons are thrown
onto the boat,
delicacies for the Emperor spill to become food for fish,
vanity boxes scatter like seaweed divers discarded.
A thousand years of sadness linger on this shore
even in the sound of waves breaking.

The Empress Dowager carries her six-year-old royal grandson; her daughter-in-law has more mundane problems. The feeling of confusion piles up with each of the seven images, then releases in “sound of the waves breaking.” The amazing thing about this passage is the profusion of women with no male image anywhere. In the actual battle, there were thousands of men here, killing each other or dying horrible deaths, yet Bashō has eyes only for the women and what they are doing to survive and continue their service in this madness created by men. By focusing only on the women in these final words of his journal, Bashō suggests that they are more gallant than the famous warriors.

In *A Narrow Path in the Heartlands*, Bashō views the tombstones of two women married to two brothers who died in battle to protect Yoshitsune:

Although they were women,
the fame of their heroic bravery
is indeed heard in the world.

Onna naredo mo kaigai shiki na no yo in kikoetsuru

Bashō praises these women for their *kaigai*, a word usually used for the heroism and bravery of men, such as the two brothers who died—but instead of the masculine Chinese characters 甲斐甲斐, he uses hiragana かいがい, the round flowing script of women, which feminizes the word so the reader will pause to wonder how *kaigai* can apply to women. He says nothing at all about the brothers, but instead honors their widows for progressing through the lonely years doing the utmost they could for their children and household. Only Bashō would consider this female conduct to be as brave and gallant as dying in ferocious battle to protect a hero. He sees through the illusion of male glory.

Outcomes of War

Chisoku begins and Bashō continues in this masterpiece of war poetry:

After the years
of grieving...finally
past eighteen—
Day and night dreams
of Father in that battle

Uki toshi o /torite hatachi mo /yaya suginu
Chichi no ikusa o /oki fusa no yume

(BRZ 4: 233) Father died in war when I was small, and I have grown up under the weight of that grief. Now, finally having reached the prime of youthful vigor⁸ I look back over those years of dreams constantly reverting to that one moment on a battlefield I have never seen in reality.

The Japanese of the tsukeku does not indicate the teenager's gender; Miyawaki imagines a male:

“For a boy, his father is his model to learn from by observation, his goal in life. Having reached the age when now he can go to war, to see a dream of father in battle is the same as being on the battlefield himself. His regrets for his father can never be forgotten. The bond between father and son is well expressed by this tsukeku.”⁹

Can this verse reach the heart of one—girl or boy—whose parent died in war or terrorism? I encourage teenagers who have lost a parent to explore this link, especially as you approach eighteen. If adults who counsel the bereaved show them the verse along with the commentary, the clear, straightforward expression of personal feeling may be consoling.

In the next tsukeku, Bashō wrote both stanzas in succession:

Even monks
and old men regardless
forced to march
Earth pounded into mochi,
our offerings fearful

Bōzu tomo / toi tomo iwazu / oi-tate-bu
tsuchi no mochi / shinji osoroshi

(BRZ 8: 173) All the men, even bald monks and grandpas, have been conscripted. Enough crops cannot be grown, so there is famine. Without sufficient rice, the villagers pound dirt in with rice on the mortar in to make rice-cakes for the divine spirits—who will be dissatisfied and continue to send this endless war.

Ritual wands aflame
spirit of a white dove
Prayers for the dead,
moon shines on the mirror
stained with blood

Nusa hi ni moete /shiro-bato no shin
sōmon () / tsuki teru kagami /chi nururan

(BRZ 3: 50; one sound-unit, a grammatical particle, is missing.) Gyōun begins with Shinto purification rituals in which a priest or female shaman waves a *nusa*, a wooden wand with white paper streamers, left and right to absorb unclean energy. Death being the ultimate pollution, at a funeral many wands are used and defiled, so must be burned. To the Japanese, the dove is the messenger of Hachiman, the Shinto god of war, and patron saint of the Genji warrior clan, and white is the color of that clan, so the white dove rising from burning wands is the warrior's spirit parting from Earth. Bashō continues the opposition of red and white: the mirror represents the purity of the soul, but the bloodshed in war stains the surface so it no longer reflects the moon. Dreams of dead father, dirt mixed with rice, mirror stained with blood, are all outcomes of war, tragic but devoid of glory.

In conclusion is this *tsukeku* in which Bashō follows a stanza by Sora in 1686, three years before they went on their journey to the heartlands:

The punitive force
already has set forth
in solemn dignity
For one night's vow
he empties his purse

Sude ni tatsu /utte no tsukai / ikameshiku
Ichiya no chigiri / zeni ga kazukeru

(BRZ 4: 109) The emperor has ordered troops to subjugate the rebels; the samurai gather at night, and when morning comes, leave camp with strict, solemn military precision. Miyawaki, complying with the title of his book, *Bashō's Verses of Human Feeling*, explains the feelings of Japanese people in Sora's imagery: the troops following an imperial proclamation feel *kinpaku*, "pressured and tense"; their *genshuku*, "gravity,

solemnity,” makes them *monomonoshiku* “pretentious, pompous, showy”¹⁰

Meanwhile, the commander of the rebels (Han Solo) has spent the night in a brothel, and at dawn hastily departs to prepare his army. Before he leaves, unlikely to need cash ever again, he gives all he has to his partner in “one night’s vow.” (Military commanders carry considerable funds.) She is not mentioned in any word, but still we can appreciate this indentured slave who got lucky: instead of living out her days until every night sex with a different customer brings her syphilis and death, she can pay back the money the brothel loaned her family and return to her village. We may feel her joy when she realizes what this powerful man has given her, and also her grief knowing why he is giving away all his cash.

Bashō contrasts the pretentious and contrived dignity of the ‘punitive force’ with the noble altruism of the rebel commander who rescues a human being from slavery, and also with the glory of the woman ready to go forth on her new life, fortified by the money she now has and by her memories of the man who loved her for one night then gave her the means to freedom.

Endnotes

1 Shirane, Haruo. *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashō*. Stanford: Stanford University, 1998: p. 39.

2 Ibid, p. 239 - 240

2 Ibid, p. 238

4 BRZ 4: 162 means that this *tsukeku* appears in volume 4, page 162 of Shimasue Kiyoshi (ed.) *Bashō Renku Zenchōsai (Complete Anthology of Bashō Renku with Interpretations)* in eleven volumes. Tokyo: Ofuusha, 1970.

5 Miyawaki Masahiko. *Bashō no Ninjōku: Tsukeku no Sekai (Bashō’s Verses of Human Affection: The World of Tsukeku)* Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2008: 207. I recommend this inexpensive paperback to anyone who wants to study Bashō’s “bone marrow” in Japanese.

6 Strunk, William Jr and White, E.B. *The Elements of Style*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000: 32-33.

7 Miyawaki, op. cit. p. 209.

8 The Japanese says “age twenty,” however they counted birth as age one, and

each New Years as one year older, so the Western count averages a year and a half younger. “Age twenty” was when a child became an adult, so the Western eighteen corresponds.

9 Miyawaki, op. cit. p. 78

10 Ibid: p. 142 – 143

Jeff Robbins has lived in Japan for 30 years and studied in Japanese the haiku, renku, tanka, journals, haibun, letters, and spoken word of Bashō. His website <https://www.Bashō4humanity.com> explores several hundred Bashō works which appear nowhere else in English. Jeff’s great wish is for affiliation: to join with a group who will take over this material, work with him to improve it, and spread it worldwide. Please send feedback to Bashō4humanity@gmail.com.