

This Tangled, Tangled Translation: Akiko Yosano's *Midaregami*

Julie Ireland

Julie Ireland's "This Tangled, Tangled Translation: Akiko Yosano's Midaregami" declares that Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda's Tangled Hair, a collection of Akiko Yosano's feminist poetry, "is at best a problematic text." Yosano is "one of Japan's most famous and controversial modern poets" who published over 50,000 poems during her lifetime. The problem Ireland identifies is that Goldstein and Shinoda's edition has become the primary text through which English readers experience Yosano's work; yet, these male editors provide "no apparatus explaining how, as men, their experiences may have influenced their translation of Yosano's tanka." Ireland readily admits that there "is nothing inherently problematic with men translating poetry by women," but the lack of an editorial apparatus that explains their decisions masks "the liberties" they take in the translation and selection process. Ultimately, Ireland argues, this exclusion "diminishes the feminist content" of Yosano's controversial work since they omit some of her most poignant feminist work. Ireland compares this editorial choice to Zailig Pollock's notion of the editorial "storyteller." That is, Pollock recognizes the editor as an intercessor in an edition's creation, and thus he or she must provide a "letter of intention" so that readers are aware that their experience is being mediated by an editorial presence. This lack of forthright editorial decision-making on the part of Goldstein and Shinoda, Ireland argues, makes the English edition of Midaregami troublesome. Ireland's contribution to this complicated story is to carefully untangle the editorial moments where Goldstein and Shinoda went wrong in publishing Yosano's poetry; she provides an apparatus through which we may partially recover this important feminist writing.

– Dr. Matthew Huculak

Akiko Yosano¹ (1878-1942) is recognized by many readers and critics as the “poetess of passion” (*jōnetsu no joryū kajin*), the ‘new woman’ (*atarashii onna*), or even the suffragette” (Rowly 29). Her collection of *tanka* entitled *Midaregami*, or *Tangled Hair*, as it is best translated in English, remains one of the most influential Japanese works by a female modernist poet. The Kadogawa Shoten paperback edition of *Midaregami* is one of that publisher’s long-time bestsellers. *Midaregami* was also chosen to represent the year 1901 in Shinchōsha’s “100 Books of the 20th Century” series (Beichman 1-5). While *Midaregami*’s fame is centered upon Yosano’s erotic redefinition of the female self and her challenging of traditional Japanese gender stereotypes, her overall body of work is by no means limited to those topics. Yosano was “the first [poet] to glorify the female body” in Japanese literature (Goldstein 19). Before *Midaregami* “breasts had never been mentioned in *tanka*” except in passing references to breastfeeding (21), nor had the self, especially the female self, been considered a topic worthy of representation in poetry.

Yosano and her contemporary Takuboku Ishikawa, both of whom published their first works at the turn of the nineteenth century, were the first to use *tanka* as a diary, capturing both the mundane and profound inner workings of the self over a long period of time. While Ishikawa’s work is more colloquial, Yosano’s self-glorification and elevation

¹ All Japanese names in this paper appear in the Western fashion with the given name preceding the family name, rather than the family name first.

of the female form, along with the rebellious and anti-establishment interludes in *Midaregami*, helped set her apart as one of Japan's most controversial modern poets. Throughout her lifetime, Yosano published over 50,000 *tanka* and many free-verse poems, in addition to essays and critical works addressing topics such as education, morality, war, and the ennoblement of motherhood (Larson 10-12).

Although Akiko Yosano is considered one of the most controversial Japanese modern feminist poets of the late Meiji period, the most commonly and widely used English translations of the *tanka* which comprise *Midaregami* were not completed until 1971 by Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda. Of the 399 *tanka* in *Midaregami*, Goldstein and Shinoda only published 165 selected pieces in their edition entitled *Tangled Hair*. While this edition contains a textual note explaining the complexities of translating poetry, as well as a note stating that references deemed irrelevant to Western readers were removed, there is no apparatus explaining how, as men, their experiences may have influenced their translation of Yosano's *tanka*. While there is nothing inherently problematic with men translating poetry by women, the liberties that Goldstein and Shinoda take to Westernize *Midaregami* undermine the feminist content.

By publishing only 165 of the 399 original *tanka* in *Midaregami*, Goldstein and Shinoda mediate the reader's experience by changing the thematic frame developed in *tanka* no. 1, which is omitted from *Tangled Hair*. The publication does not contain a letter of intention explaining the selection process and the only cue the reader has to the omission of the remaining poems is the word "selected" in the subtitle on the title page. Additionally, there is no explanation of how this selection sets up Goldstein and Shinoda as *storytellers*, a concept Zailig Pollock develops in his essay "The Editor as Storyteller." When Pollock began the processes of editing A.M. Klein's *Complete Poetry and Notebooks*, he wanted to tell a particular story about Klein, specifically his descent into madness and silence. Although there are many different approaches Pollock could have taken as an editor, he specifically chose to frame his edition in accordance with the story he wanted readers to know about Klein. Goldstein and Shinoda have done the same in *Tangled Hair*. Rather than frame the collection through the social significance of Yosano's feminine egoism, they accentuate the narcissistic novelty of *Midaregami*, which, in conjunction with its autobiographical content,² first drew readers to the text.

Goldstein and Shinoda are not the only translators and editors who shape their interpretations of *Midaregami* primarily through the narcissistic novelty of romance and scandal. James O'Brien explains in his essay "A Few Strands of Tangled Hair" how he alters the order of Yosano's *tanka* in order to better convey a "love affair progressing from the beginning stages to the breakup and recovery" in the hopes of making *Midaregami* more relatable to his undergraduate students (O'Brien 113). O'Brien's altered order also ensures his students are aware of the presence of the "other woman" and the autobiographical element to the collection. O'Brien, however, keeps the chronological numbering of the poems rather than imposing new numbers on them like Goldstein and Shinoda. While he explains his motivations for changing the order of the *tanka*, he does not

² Yosano recorded her feelings about discovering her sexuality and her love affair with the man that would become her husband, Tekkan Yosano, who, at the beginning of their romance, was living unhappily with his pregnant common-law wife.

reflect on how those changes could inadvertently misrepresent Yosano's narrative thread, unique in Meiji Japan, that connects the series of *tanka* as diary entries. In opposition to the Japanese tradition of reservation and self-sacrifice, the erotic, rebellious, and progressive tones of the poem may be interpreted by readers as a simple, or even trite, romantic narrative meant to titillate and entertain. Goldstein and Shinoda's ordering of the *tanka* in *Tangled Hair* is more troublesome and complicated to ascertain, which is primarily due to the lack of textual apparatus explaining the selection process. Unlike O'Brien's grouping of several poems to entice further exploration of Yosano and *Midaregami*, Goldstein and Shinoda's edition assumes authority in representing the overall effect, or spirit, of the collection.

There are currently no complete English editions of *Midaregami* translated by a woman, although Janine Beichman has translated many of the *tanka* in her book *Embracing The Firebird: Yosano Akiko and the Birth of the Female Voice in Modern Japanese Poetry*. Initially Beichman's translations appear to only subtly differ from Goldstein and Shinoda's versions, but the slight variations make the speaker more authoritative and less vulnerable, subverting the Japanese ideal of subservient women at the time. It is difficult to ascertain which version best represents Yosano's poetic style without being able to translate the original text. However, as Harriette Grissom notes in her article "The Tanka Poetry of Yosano Akiko: Transformation of Tradition Through the Female Voice," both Asian and Western critics have often characterized Yosano's poetry as "unfeminine," mainly because of her audacious portrayal of female sexuality. With this in mind, Goldstein and Shinoda's translations appear adulterated when compared to Beichman's translations, which capture the power of female sexuality rather than arbitrate it for a wider, more conservative audience.

Before moving into a critical analysis of the poems, it is important to have a brief understanding of *tanka* as a poetic form, as well as the difficulties surrounding the translation of *tanka*. Literally meaning "short song or poem," *tanka* is the traditional form of Japanese poetry (Fielden). The *tanka* is a lyrical unrhymed verse of thirty-one *on*, or sound units, arranged 5/7/5/7/7. Japanese poetry does not rely on rhyme as almost all syllables, or sound units, consist of a single vowel sound or a consonant and a vowel. With only five rhyming vowels in Japanese, a rhyme-based poem would be far too simple to be considered artistic. Meter based on stress is also not possible, as poetic stress accents, such as those that exist in English, do not exist in Japanese. In order to offset the inherent fluidity of the *tanka*, the 5/7/5 combination of alteration and unevenness rhythmically and semantically provides balance. Typically *tanka* do not have titles; instead, there is an overarching theme or topic, called *dai*, for a larger collection, as is the case with Yosano's *Midaregami*. The majority of *tanka* focus on human relationships or authors' personal situations, although there have been *tanka* that praise nature. The ideal *tanka* harmonizes the emotional state of the poet using the elements of the outer world to portray that emotional state.

Translating both the form and cultural meaning of *tanka* is an extremely difficult task. Most translators, including Goldstein and Shinoda, omit cultural references and allusions that are irrelevant to Western readers. Form is also almost impossible to retain in translation. Yosano ended many of her *tanka* with a "noun or pronoun preceded by

modifying phrases” (O’Brien 118), which has not successfully been included in any translations of *Midaregami*. Attempts to keep the 5/7/5/7/7 *on*, sound unit, and pattern are also often avoided in order to maintain the simple, spontaneous, and natural effect of the original. Using syllables rather than *on* either lengthens the poems or makes them appear cumbersome.³ Most translators avoid rhyming in *tanka*,⁴ as it does not authentically represent the poetic genre.

At the turn of the twentieth century, this genre underwent vast changes – changes that Yosano both influenced and resisted. In the late nineteenth century, Tekkan Yosano, claiming the poetry of the early Meiji period was narrow, vulgar, effeminate, and consequently harmful to Japan, advocated for a more “manly” poetry and believed that the nation’s prosperity was directly related to its national literature. Akiko Yosano pointed out the irony of the move towards reforming *tanka* as more masculine, as many of the classical influences male poets turned to as their models were by female writers from the Heian period, such as Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon. After the end of the Heian period, men adopted the literary traditions originated by female poets and, in turn, patriarchal influences then marginalized and silenced the voices of women. Akiko Yosano’s poetic voice, one focused on redefining the female self, was the first to be widely heard after a long void of female participation in culture production.

Goldstein and Shinoda’s mediation of *Midaregami*, marginalizes Yosano’s voice, both in their translation and in their arrangement of the text. They choose to omit Yosano’s opening *tanka*, a poem that sets the tone for the whole series, and, in a way, acts like a thesis:

A star who once
Within night’s velvet whispered
All the words of love
Is now a mortal in the world below —
Look on this untamed hair! (Beichman 194)⁵

Yosano is setting up a self-glorifying anti-establishment narrative,⁶ as well as introducing her collection similarly to a classic epic. This poem also references Yosano’s *dai*: untamed hair. The most widely accepted English translation of the word *midaregami* is tangled hair. Yosano plays with the image of hair to symbolize a wide array of emotions and themes, expanding and challenging *Midaregami*’s cultural connotations. In Meiji Japan, *midaregami* was a euphemism for an immoral or loose woman. Even a few stray strands of hair in an otherwise neatly arranged hairstyle held erotic resonances. Before the onset of the Taishō period in 1912, Japanese women took pride in straight, long, black hair. Part of

³ Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai’s 1948 translation of *Midaregami* is an example of the cumbersome effect of imposing 5/7/5/7/7 syllables rather than *on*.

⁴ H. H. Honda’s 1957 translations are an exception

⁵ In Beichman’s text this translation appears under a scanned copy of the original hiragana.

⁶ She writes against the establishment of the Buddhist religion, which “exhorts people to think about the eternal life to come and to reject the pleasures of this world” (Goldstein and Shinoda 158).

feminine virtue was to have meticulously neat hair. It was even considered a disgrace for others, with the exception of lovers, to see a woman's disheveled hair (Goldstein and Shinoda "Introduction" 22-23). Yosano's closing line then challenges the societal view that female sexuality should be hidden. Goldstein and Shinoda, however, do just that. They replace the original opening with a much more demure and coy protest to conventional ideas regarding love and sex:

Camellia, plum,
 Once these were white—
 I find in peace
 Color
 That does not blame my sin.

Although Goldstein and Shinoda position this *tanka* as no. 1, it is actually no. 5 in the chronological sequence of *Midaregami*. By using no. 5 as the first in the series, Goldstein and Shinoda add a sense of regret and guilt to the framing of *Midaregami*. When read in conjunction with no. 1, no. 5 adds depth to the character of the speaker: although she is strong and ambitious, she is still concerned with her position in and appearance to society.

Goldstein and Shinoda's omission of no. 1 is not the only exclusion that greatly influences the reader's overall experience of *Midaregami*. No. 399, Yosano's final *tanka* in the series, is also left out. Instead, Goldstein and Shinoda use no. 393 (no. 165 in their edition) to end *Midaregami*:

Evening of departing spring:
 How alive
 The sutra
 Chanted by that insane girl
 Under the temple wisteria

As a concluding *tanka* to the collection, this poem offers no closure, nor is there any indication that the speaker's attempts to emancipate women from cultural stereotypes about sex have had any effect. Her attempts appear to have been in vain. Goldstein and Shinoda's textual notes also suggest a bias: "In those days when freedom of love was not recognized, many girls went insane or committed suicide or pined away and died" (165). They also suggest, "[t]he fact that the girl is insane gives rise to the conjecture that the cause must have been a broken heart" (165). Although Goldstein and Shinoda use the word "insane" to characterize the incumbent's daughter, from the manner in which insanity is described in their explanatory note it may be of benefit to consider the girl as hysterical. As Briggs suggests in her article "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology," hysteria should not only be considered as physical or psychological. While many women unknowingly suffered from reproductive diseases or mental illnesses, hysteria is also a rationalization for clinging to

traditional gender roles. While hysteria is largely viewed as a Western concept, many of the same societal influences were at work in Meiji Japan. Considering the insanity of the girl in this way also coheres to several of the main themes of *Midaregami*, including sexual freedom, self-glorification, and the emancipation of women.

Yosano's final *tanka* in the series provides the reader with a sense of closure that Goldstein and Shinoda omit from their version:

A brief dream
Of a spring evening
Hidden without:
You've cleared it up,
You thirteen strings! (Beichman)

The "thirteen strings" in this *tanka* refer to the *koto*,⁷ the national instrument of Japan. Yosano often refers to the *koto* as a medium for communication,⁸ much like *tanka*. The speaker suggests that through the *koto*, and by extension through *tanka*, she has been able to resolve or reconcile the vast, and sometimes contradictory, emotions she felt throughout her youth, or "spring." By excluding this *tanka* from *Tangled Hair*, Goldstein and Shinoda have altered the concluding thoughts a reader may have about *Midaregami* as a series of poems. Instead of a confessional progression, moving from the onset of adulthood and sexual awakening to the synthesis of sexuality and erotic desire in the speaker's daily life, the collection appears more static. Concluding with no. 393 rather than no. 399 is also problematic in that it makes the speaker appear dissatisfied with the way the narrative has progressed. In no. 399 the speaker has reached a moment of personal clarity and can reflect on her tumultuous youth. Goldstein and Shinoda's editing decisions have drastically affected the reception of Yosano's poems; however, their influence spans much further than the framing of the collection.

Goldstein and Shinoda's translations of no. 68 and no. 321 (no. 26 and no. 135 respectively in their edition) are also questionable. Both *tanka* relate to the female body, specifically the breasts. No. 68, translated by Goldstein and Shinoda, is as follows:

Softly I pushed open
That door
We call a mystery,
These full breasts
Held in both my hands.

⁷ Within *Midaregami* there are several references to the *koto*, including no. 96 and no. 97.

⁸ The inclusion of *koto* imagery can also be seen as a reference to Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari*, when Genji, the protagonist, falls in love with a woman by merely hearing her exquisite *koto* melodies.

While there does not appear to be anything overtly problematic with their translation, Beichman's translation offers a stark contrast:

Pressing my breasts
I softly kick aside
The curtain of mystery,
How deep the crimson
Of the flower here.

Instead of including the floral imagery in the *tanka*, as Beichman does, Goldstein and Shinoda explain the relevance of the phrase in their explanatory notes: “*Kokonaru hana*⁹ is literally ‘flowers blooming here,’ but the phrase is interpreted as ‘in this world of sexual love’” (130). In their notes on no. 5, Goldstein and Shinoda express the importance of flowers and colour in Japanese poetry. It is strange then that they would remove what appears to be an important allusion – an allusion Beichman considered worth preserving. Goldstein and Shinoda's diction choices also have significantly different connotations than Beichman's, which are stronger. For example, the speaker in Goldstein and Shinoda's translation “softly” pushes open the door while the speaker in Beichman's translation “softly kick[s] aside the curtain¹⁰ of mystery.” One of the most problematic word choices in Goldstein and Shinoda's translation is “full.” In Beichman's translation, the speaker does not qualify her breasts. The inclusion of the word “full” introduces the male gaze to the *tanka*. In their note to the text, Goldstein and Shinoda state “the woman in Akiko's poem sings metaphorically of the ecstasy of the sexual love she has experienced” (130). By including the qualifier “full” in their translation, they assume that the speaker's satisfaction with her sexuality and body is determined by how her male partner views her body. Unlike Beichman, Goldstein and Shinoda use the pronoun “we,”¹¹ placing both the speaker's partner with her and assuming her experience is concerned with societal conceptions. Goldstein and Shinoda have removed almost all of the content suggesting self-discovery – all that is behind the door in this translation is the speaker's full breasts, not the red world of sexual love. The placement of “breasts” near the end of the *tanka*, rather than at the beginning, as in Beichman's translation, puts more emphasis on her body than on the speaker's self-reflection.

Goldstein and Shinoda's translation of *tanka* no. 321 reveals similar problems:

Spring is short!
Nothing endures!
I cried,
Letting him touch

⁹ This is part of a roman rendering for the original hiragana, which reads: “Chibusa osae / Shinpi no tobari / Sotokerinu / Kokonaru hana no / Benizo koki” (Goldstein and Shinoda)

¹⁰ Door likely refers to a *shoji* screen, a sliding door. In that case “curtain” has similar connotations to “door.”

¹¹ Often pronouns are assumed by context in Japanese. The inclusion of “we” is thus reflective of Goldstein and Shinoda's interpretation of the poem.

These supple breasts!

The tone of this translation is dramatic in an almost derogatory sense. Beichman's translation has very different connotations:

Spring is short
 What is there that has eternal life
 I said and
 Made his hands seek out
 My powerful breasts

In comparison to Beichman's translation, the speaker in Goldstein and Shinoda's translation appears much more docile, crying rather than simply saying. Lines four and five are also drastically different. Goldstein and Shinoda's speaker lets the man touch her breasts, making it appear as if the man's sexuality is dominant over the woman's. The word "supple" also suggests that the speaker's breasts are purely for the enjoyment of the man, that she herself does not derive pleasure from them. In Beichman's translation, the woman's sexuality is equal to or dominant over the man's, making him feel her powerful breasts. The speaker is not timid and enjoys the feminine strength of her sexuality. There are also discrepancies between Goldstein and Shinoda's textual notes and their translation. Their lengthy note explains the religious connotations to the *tanka*, suggesting that "Akiko's fresh reliance on the moment, on the supremacy of love in this world, has in it some element of the Zen belief in full participation of the moment at hand" (158). In contrast, however, their translation of the *tanka* suggests an almost forced participation in the sexual moment. Beichman's translation of the poem is more fitting of the textual notes provided by Goldstein and Shinoda than their own version.

While Goldstein and Shinoda leave much to be desired in their translation of *Midaregami*, it should be noted that not all of their editorial decisions negatively impact the reception of Yosano's *tanka*. No. 388 (no. 163 in *Tangled Hair*) adds the complexity of the speaker's personality, something that is lacking in many of their other translations. Rather than being consumed by erotic passion and narcissism, the speaker reflects on what her future might be like and, in this case, on the possibility that it will be sad and lonely:

Which autumn flowers
 For my future?
 Lespedeza,
 Asters...
 All limited, small.

Although *Midaregami* is famed for its erotic content, this *tanka* delves into the psyche of the speaker, which is an indication of how Yosano uses *tanka* similarly to a diary. Not only

are there instances of autobiographical material within *Midaregami*, there are also the concerns she has about her future as a writer. It is possible that Yosano's speaker is reflecting her own concern with the reception of her future work.¹² *Midaregami* is bright and controversial, youthful, rebellious, and powerful – much like the flowers of spring.

Yosano's erotic redefinition of the female self and resistance to traditional Japanese gender stereotypes, has made *Midaregami* a canonical Japanese text. However, Goldstein and Shinoda's mediation of that text removes much of the feminist content, which Beichman restores with her translations. While not all of their editing decisions negatively impact the reception of Yosano's text, Goldstein and Shinoda's framing and diction choices create a narrative that differs significantly from the original text. Although Goldstein and Shinoda may have made their editorial choices in order to deliver *Midaregami* to a wider English speaking audience, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent their translation is personal interpretation, and how much is warranted by the original. Regardless of their intentions, Goldstein and Shinoda's *Tangled Hair* is, at best, a problematic text.

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¹² Towards the end of her life Akiko was primarily focused on redefining femininity through her entire life experience, often giving preference to her experiences balancing her marriage and career. She resented the attention *Midaregami* received as it overshadowed her later work. See Beichman 1-5, Goldstein and Shinoda 1-25 and 88, Larson 10-26, and Grissom 21-23.

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