

Excerpt from Richard Bowers, <sup>trans.</sup> The Diary of Musasari Shikibu

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spring I first saw her, has now thinned out in places as though someone had done it deliberately; you would hardly credit it. Even so, it still falls well and reaches to the ground and a little farther.

The woman known as Koma had very long hair too. In the past she used to be a marvellous young lady-in-waiting, but now she has become an old stick-in-the-mud and immures herself at home.

59. Well, now, I have discussed their looks, but people's characters—that's quite a different matter. Everyone has their quirks and no one is ever really evil. Neither is it possible for everyone to be all things all of the time: attractive, restrained, intelligent, tasteful, and trustworthy. Everyone is different and it's often difficult to know whom to praise. But I should stop myself rambling on like this.

Someone who heard there was a Lady Chūjō serving in the household of the High Priestess of the Kamo Shrines happened to show me in secret a letter which Lady Chūjō had written. It was dreadfully affected. She seemed to think that no one in the world was as intelligent or discerning as she, that everyone else was spiritless and insensitive. When I saw it I could hardly contain myself and I became quite worked up, as I believe the saying goes. How could she be so odious? I realize it was a personal letter, but she had actually written: "When it comes to judging poetry, who can rival our Princess? She is the only one who could recognize a promising talent nowadays!" There may be some point in what she says, but if she claims that much for her circle of friends, then how is it they produce so few poems of any merit? Admittedly they do seem to be very elegant and sophisticated, but were you to make a comparison, I doubt they would necessarily prove to be any better than the women I see around me.

They keep very much to themselves. Whenever I have visited them, for it is a place famous for beautiful moonlit nights, marvellous dawn skies, cherries, and the song of the wood thrush, the High Priestess has always seemed most sensitive. The place has an aura of seclusion and mystery about it, and they have very little to distract them. Rarely are they ever in the rush we are whenever Her

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Majesty visits the Emperor, or His Excellency decides to come and stay the night. Indeed, the place naturally lends itself to poetry. Amid such perfect elegance, how could one possibly fail to produce anything but excellent poems?

What if a decrepit old fossil like myself were to take service with the High Priestess, and say I met a man I did not know and exchanged poems with him; I am certain I would be able to relax, automatically absorbing much of the elegance of the place, secure in the knowledge that no one would give me a bad name. And if one of our young women, who have nothing to be ashamed of either in terms of beauty or age, were to take it into her head to act the gracious lady and converse by means of poems, I am convinced that she would compare very favorably with them.

60. But here in the Palace there are no other consorts or empresses to keep Her Majesty on her mettle day and night, and there are no ladies-in-waiting in any of the other households who can really challenge us, with the result that all of us, men and women alike, lack any sense of rivalry and are far too easygoing. Her Majesty frowns on any seductive behavior as the height of frivolity, so anyone who wants to get on takes care never to seem too forward. Of course that is not to say that we do not have women of quite a different persuasion, women who care nothing for being thought flirtatious and lighthearted, and getting a bad name for themselves. The men strike up relationships with this kind of woman because they are such easy game. They must think us either as dull as ditchwater or just plain feckless. Not that the upper- and middle-ranking women do anything to enhance Her Majesty's reputation either; they are far too self-satisfied and full of themselves. It's quite disgraceful!

61. It may seem as if we now know all there is to know about these women close to Her Majesty, but then everyone has her own personality and no one is really that much better or worse than anyone else. If they are good in one aspect they are bad in another, it seems. Mind you, it would, of course, be most improper for the older women to act foolishly at a time when the younger ones themselves are apparently trying to appear serious and dignified; it's just

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when it comes to taste." It is very easy to criticize people, but a far more difficult task to keep oneself in check, and it is while one forgets this truth, lauds oneself to the skies, treats everyone else as worthless and generally despises others, that one's true character is often clearly revealed.

It was a letter such as I would have loved to have shown you, but the person who stole it from where it was hidden showed it to me in secret and took it back—such a pity!

64. Now someone who did carry on a fascinating correspondence was Izumi Shikibu. She does have a rather unsavory side to her character but has a genius for tossing off letters with ease and can make the most banal statement sound special. Her poems are quite delightful. Although her knowledge of the canon and her judgments leave something to be desired, she can produce poems at will and always manages to include some clever phrase or other that catches the eye, and yet when it comes to criticizing or judging the work of others, well, she never really comes up to scratch; the sort of person who relies on a talent for extemporization, one feels. I cannot think of her as a poet of the highest quality.

65. The wife of the Governor of Tanba is known to everyone in the service of Her Majesty and His Excellency as Masahira Emon. She may not be a genius but she has great poise and does not feel that she has to compose a poem on everything she sees merely because she is a poet. From what I have seen, her work is most accomplished, even her occasional verse. People who think so much of themselves that, at the drop of a hat, they compose lame verses that only just hang together or produce the most pretentious compositions imaginable are quite odious and rather pathetic.

66. Sei Shōnagon, for instance, was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever, and littered her writings with Chinese characters, but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to be sensitive in the most unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are

bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them?

I criticize other women like this, but here is one who has managed to survive this far without having achieved anything of note and has nothing to rely on in the future that might afford her the slightest consolation. Yet, perhaps because I still retain the conviction that I am not the kind of person to abandon herself completely to despair, on autumn evenings, when nostalgia is at its most poignant, I go out and sit on the veranda to gaze in reverie. "Is this the moon that used to praise my beauty?" I say to myself, as I conjure up memories of the past. Then, realizing that I am making precisely that mistake which must be avoided, I become uneasy and move inside a little, while still, of course, continuing to fret and worry.

67. I remember how in the cool of the evening I used to play the koto to myself, rather badly; I was always worried lest someone were to hear me and realize that I was just "adding to the sadness of it all." How silly of me, and yet how sad! So now my two kotos, one of thirteen strings and the other of six, stand in a miserable little closet blackened with soot, ready tuned but idle. Through neglect—I forgot, for example, to ask that the bridges be removed on rainy days—they have accumulated the dust and lean there now against a cupboard, their necks jammed between that and a pillar, with a biwa standing on either side.

There is also a pair of large cupboards crammed full to bursting point. One is full of old poems and tales that have become the home for countless silverfish that scatter in such an unpleasant manner that no one cares to look at them any more; the other is full of Chinese books which have lain unattended ever since he who carefully collected them passed away. Whenever my loneliness threatens to overwhelm me, I take out one or two of them to look at. But my women gather together behind my back. "It's because she goes on like this that she is so miserable. What kind of lady is it who reads Chinese books?" they whisper. "In the past it was not even the done thing to read sutras!" "Yes," I feel like replying, "but I've never seen anyone who lived longer just because they obeyed a prohibition!" But

that would be inconsiderate of me, for what they say is not unreasonable.

68. Everyone reacts differently. Some are cheerful, open-hearted, and forthcoming; others are born pessimists, amused by nothing, the kind who search through old letters, carry out penances, in one sutra without end, and clack their beads, all of which I find most unseemly. So aware am I of my women's prying eyes that I hesitate to do even those things a woman in my position should allow herself to do. How much more so at court, where I do have many things I wish to say but always think better of it. There would be no point, I tell myself, in explaining to people who would never understand, and as it would only be causing trouble with women who think of nothing but themselves and are always carping, I just keep my thoughts to myself. It is very rare that one finds people of true understanding; for the most part they judge everything by their own standards and ignore everyone else's opinion.

69. So I seem to be misunderstood, and they think that I am shy. There have been times when I have been forced to sit in their company, and on such occasions I have tried to avoid their petty criticisms, not because I am particularly shy but because I consider it all so distasteful; as a result, I am now known as somewhat of a dullard.

"Well, we never expected this!" they all say. "No one liked her. They all said she was pretentious, awkward, difficult to approach, prickly, too fond of her tales, haughty, prone to verifying, disdainful, cantankerous, and scornful. But when you meet her, she is strangely meek, a completely different person altogether!"

How embarrassing! Do they really look upon me as such a dull thing. I wonder? But I am what I am and so act accordingly. Her Majesty too has often remarked that she had thought I was not the kind of person with whom she could ever relax, but that now I have become closer to her than any of the others. I am so perversely standoffish; if only I can avoid putting off those for whom I have genuine respect.

70. The key to everything is to be pleasant, gentle, properly relaxed, and self-possessed; this is what makes for charm and

composure in a woman. No matter how amorous or capricious one may be, as long as you are well-meaning at heart and refrain from anything that might cause embarrassment to others, you will be forgiven.

On the other hand, women who think too highly of themselves and act in a pretentious and overbearing manner become the object of attention, even when they take great care over their least move, and once this happens, people are bound to find fault with whatever they say or do, going so far as to criticize how they sit down or how they take their leave. Those, of course, who tend to contradict themselves when they talk and disparage their companions are watched and listened to all the more. As long as you are free from such faults, people will be prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt and show you good will, no matter how superficially.

Those who go out of their way to hurt others deserve to be ridiculed, as do those who act thoughtlessly even though they may not mean to. Some people are so good-natured that they can still care for those who hate them, but I myself find it very difficult. Does the Buddha himself in all his compassion ever argue that one can insult the three treasures with impunity? How in this sullied world of ours can we expect those who are hard done by not to reciprocate in kind? And yet there is a difference in how people will react: some glare at you openly with malicious intent and spread the most dreadful rumors hoping to enhance themselves thereby, whereas others hide their feelings and appear to be quite friendly on the surface; thus are true natures revealed.

There is a woman called Saemon no Naishi, who, for some strange reason, took a dislike to me, I cannot think why. I heard all sorts of malicious rumors about myself.

His Majesty was listening to someone reading the *Tale of Genji* aloud. "She must have read the Chronicles of Japan!" he said. "She seems very learned." Saemon no Naishi heard this and apparently jumped to conclusions, spreading it abroad among the senior courtiers that I was flaunting my learning. She gave me the nickname Our Lady of the Chronicles. How utterly ridiculous! Would I, who hes-

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itate to reveal my learning in front of my women at home, ever think of doing so at court?

When my brother, Secretary at the Ministry of Cere-monial, was a young boy learning the Chinese classics, I was in the habit of listening to him and I became unusually proficient at understanding those passages which he found too difficult to grasp. Father, a most learned man, was always regretting the fact: "Just my luck!" he would say. "What a pity she was not born a man!" But then gradually I realized that people were saying, "It's bad enough when a man flaunts his learning; she will come to no good," and ever since then I have avoided writing even the simplest character. My handwriting is appalling. And as for those classics, or whatever they are called, that I used to read, I gave them up entirely. Still I kept on hearing these malicious remarks. Worried what people would think if they heard such rumors, I pretended to be unable to read even the inscriptions on the screens. Then Her Majesty asked me to read to her here and there from the Collected Works of Po Chü-i, and, because she evinced a desire to know more about such things, we carefully chose a time when other women would not be present and, amateur that I was, I read with her the two books of Po Chü-i's New Ballads in secret; we started the summer before last. I hid this fact from the others, as did Her Majesty, but somehow His Excellency and the Emperor got wind of it and they had some beautiful copies made of various Chinese books, which His Excellency then presented to Her Majesty. That gossip Saemon no Naishi could never have found out that Her Majesty had actually asked me to study with her, for, if she had, I would never have heard the last of it. Ah what a prattling, tiresome world it is!

72. Now I shall be absolutely frank. I care little for what others say. I have decided to put my trust in Amida and immerse myself in reading sutras. You might expect me to have no compunction in becoming a nun, for I have lost what little attachment I retained for the trials and pains that life has to offer, and yet still I hesitate; even if I were to commit myself to turning my back on the world, there might still be moments of irresolution before he came for

me, trailing clouds of glory. The time too is ripe. If I get much older my eyesight will surely weaken to the point that I shall be unable to read the sutras, and my spirits will fail. It may seem that I am merely going through the motions of being a true believer, but I assure you that I can think of little else at the present moment. But then someone with as much to atone for as myself may not qualify for salvation; there are so many things that serve to remind one of the transgressions of a former existence. Ah the wretchedness of it all!

73. I want to reveal all to you, the good and the bad, worldly matters and private sorrows, things I cannot really go on discussing in this letter, but, no matter how objectionable the person one is describing, perhaps one should never tell all. You must find life irksome, just look how fretful I am! You must write to me with your own thoughts; no matter if you have less to say than all my useless prattle, I would love to hear from you. Mind you, if this letter ever got into the wrong hands even for a moment it would be a disaster, but there is so much more I want to tell you.

Recently I tore up and burned most of my old letters and papers. I used the rest to make dolls' houses this last spring and since then I have had no correspondence to speak of. I feel I should not use new paper so I'm afraid this will look very shabby, but I am not trying to be rude; I have my reasons.

Please return this as soon as you have read it. There may well be parts that are difficult to read and places where I have left out a word or two, but just disregard them and read it through. So you see—I still fret over what others think of me, and if I had to sum up my position now I would have to admit I still retain a strong sense of attachment for this world. But what can I do about it?

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