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Shining Moon:

A Subjective Essay with translations on some medieval Asian Women's Literature

Katharine Margot Toohey

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Preface

This collection traces medieval Asian women writers, spanning Korea, China, Japan, Vietnam, Kashmir, India, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq and Armenia, through analysis and new creative translation of their work.

This is designed to be an introduction to further study of this vivid aspect of medieval literature, one sometimes overshadowed in western culture by that of Europe. The works in *Shining Moon* are often not connected by any common language, script, social conventions or physical environment - but by a woman writing, for her people, for her deity or for herself. More than once, such writers named themselves after their sky's lucent and constant moon when they wrote. This collection's title, *Shining Moon*, echoes this.

In these works, the narrative voice is often aligned with light that illuminates a long night. Instead of contrasting with the night, however, it seems to work through the night - in its element.

'lights lantern, night eternal, sews frontier coat -

jade waterclock, gentle gentle, lantern alight, alight -

suffers cold shelter, compels autumn night eternal.'

Heo Nanseolheon, *Autumn's night song*

The closest approximations we could find to the original medieval texts are included here, to present them in a new context that traverses thirteen languages.

The voices in this collection encompass work, exile, romantic affection, spiritual transcendence, deprivation, war, the ascetics of seasons and the countless possibilities of persona and identity itself.

There are limitless approaches a translator could take to try to convey the scope and intricacy of these texts. This volume has chosen a creative approach to reflect and honour deliberate and traditional structure and style as well as attempting to mirror line-level significance, including retaining as much as possible any intentional multiplicity of meaning in the original texts' diction.

This collection is not designed to be used as an academic text in Asian Literature but as a lens to begin to appreciate the vastness and richness of these works, which are translated here out of admiration and affection.

Here is light cast on essence.

'Atom's depth in atom's depth, expanse in expanse

within, where the spine of sugarcane stands…'

Avvaiyar, *Vinayagar Agaval*

Katharine Margot Toohey

Quemar Press

[Whilst the Middle Ages in Europe are deemed to have ended officially in 1500, it seems more useful for the purposes of this essay to date the end of the Middle Ages in Asia to the conclusion of the Chinese Ming Dynasty in 1644, as that Dynasty (1366-1644) overlaps the end of the European Medieval period. The essay will focus more, however, on writers contemporaneous with the European Middle Ages, or slightly after.]

Just as European medieval literature could be seen as historically interlinked with emancipatory roles for women authors, such as that of the female educated court storyteller or entertainer, a similar characteristic - with unauthoritarian attitudes and tones - seems to course through medieval Asian literature.

For example, the medieval Korean verse form Sijo was often written and constructed by Kisaeng, women perceived as being from lower socioeconomic areas who undertook education to work for the government performing arts authority. In light of the Kisaeng's viewed role in the social hierarchy, their poetry appears not to be expected to focus on piety or court, and could instead express emotion, wit and fondness. The tradition of Kisaeng Sijo is a tradition of clarity, affection and vigilance. Here, within Sijo syllables and structure, the author could be unfettered in representing herself and describing her thoughts and environment in a form that is concerned with analysis and resolution. In the first line of many Sijo poems, the first three syllables, the next four, the following four and the final four create the poem's theme. The second line follows the same pattern, but elaborating. Within the final line, however, the first three syllables form an unexpected counter-theme, as do the next five. The final four and three syllable sets complete the train of thought.

The Kisaeng Hwang Jini (1522–1565) wrote this as a Sijo:

冬至ᄉᆞᆯ기나긴 밤을 한 허리를 버혀내여

春風 니불 아레 서리서리 너헛다가

어론 님 오신 날 밤이여든 구뷔구뷔 펴리라

Solstice month, winter's long night. I'll tear away time from its waist.

The spring wind is a blanket I'll wrap around to enclose it,

so I can, on some night my love, in time, strays home, free its folds.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, to try to retain the Sijo syllabic, conceptual and line structure, and the original text's flow and conversational tone.)

Hwang Jini worked under her Kisaeng name Myeong-Wol, bright moon, and in this poem her persona can influence, control and guard the celestial nightfall surrounding her. She tears time from the deep winter night as if it were fabric around the night's 'waist', sometimes seen as a time-frame spanning midnight to dawn in Korea. She can use the spring wind as a blanket to protect, warm or keep the time ready and at hand, so that she can decide when to open its folds, with constant agency over the stretch of night and time itself. She will unfold the night time on some future evening when her loved one returns - a decision that suggests the female persona's survival in the future.

Hwang Jini herself has aspects of legend in Modern Korea.Versions of her story are portrayed in drama and film, with pride in the educated female spirit choosing to be an artist for art's sake and spiritual integrity. Such pride seems to have navigated the country's civil borders lately, when a novelisation of her work and life by a North Korean writer, Hong Sok-jung was the first book from the North to be awarded South Korea's Manhae Prize in 2005. Hwang Jini is thought to have chosen to become a Kisaeng to achieve an education in art, poetry, literature, dance and song, instead of being subject to confining expectations placed on women in the Joseon Dynasty (founded in 1392).

While this Sijo seems to have been written in hangul, the widely-understood popular Korean script, another female Korean poet, Heo Nanseolheon (1563–1589), expressed similar emotion and empathy through verse in Chinese script, the language associated with power and the ruling class in Korea. In her poetry, she used the power language itself to analyse and convey the effects of socioeconomic deprivation.

She wrote the poem '貧女吟' (translated here as 'Poor Girl's Poem') as a cheolgu with five syllables:

貧女吟

豈是乏容色

工鍼復工織

少小長寒門

良媒不相識

夜久織未休

戛戛鳴寒機

機中一匹練

終作阿誰衣

手把金翦刀

夜寒十指直

爲人作嫁衣

年年還獨宿

Poor Girl's Poem

How can this face charm?

Work, sew more work, weave,

lack in long cold, gates.

No good matchmaker's choice.

Long night, rest not, weave.

Tap tap: cold, goes loom,

loom holds one silk bolt.

At last, who wears it?

Grasp metal scissors:

night froze ten fingers,

making some bride's clothes.

Year - year - lone at night.

(Quemar's creative Modern English translation above tries to retain the original text's diction and meaning, the lines' five syllables, and first syllable repetitions.)

Whilst Hwang Jini uses an autobiographical persona, Heo Nanseolheon's persona in this poem is that of a young seamstress suffering in inhumane working conditions. She is alienated from her work, as she creates wedding clothes for others but is too impoverished to marry. The repetitive nature of the persona's tasks are mirrored in each line's five-syllable structure and repetition of some first syllables. The poet, however, never uses this to build a sense of security or predictability, since she uses diction with connotations of immediate danger, such as 'scissors' and 'froze'. Through juxtaposition, the persona's thoughts blend with steps in her tasks and the perilous situation surrounding her.

For the poet's higher socioeconomic audience, presenting the persona's thoughts in Chinese script placed these thoughts in the realm of advanced levels of thinking, as Chinese was considered traditionally to be the language of philosophy and intense reasoning. From within her influential political family, Heo Nanseolheon had overcome the restrictions on women in the Joseon Dynasty to achieve her education - and to give powerlessness speech through the language of the powerful.

The Joseon poet, Shin Saimdang (1504-1551), also widened the scope of 'the ruling class"s Chinese script. Instead of using it to discuss life at court,

privilege or impersonal descriptions, she creates a space where she can make known the longing she feels at being separated from her mother - a space where woman supporting each other and remaining together becomes the poem's ideal resolution, despite traditions that separated daughters and their mothers by marriage.

思親

千里家山 萬疊峯

歸心長存 夢魂中

寒松亭畔 孤輪月

鏡浦臺前 一陳風

沙上白鷺 恒聚山

波頭漁船 各西東

何時重踏 臨瀛路

彩舞斑衣 膝下縫

Thinking on my mother and father

Home lies distant, peaks re-fold,

thoughts home ever, soul guards dream,

moon, lone at Hansongjeong's edge,

wind gusts over Gyeongpodae,

small egrets flock on sand, hills,

waves, all fish boats sail west, east.

When will my path cross Gangneung?

Now I start bright needlework.

(Quemar's creative Modern English translation above tries to retain the original text's diction and meaning, its octave length and the lines' seven syllable structure.)

In the work, her persona's drive to be with her mother has a similar unhindered energy to the sudden wind that gusts over Gyeongpodae Pavilion. Although at least forty of her paintings survive, this poem is one of only two poems remaining. The other also expresses her longing for her mother's company. There is a move away from traditional generalisation in her work. The persona's agency in missing her mother gives a sense of experienced truth to everything she witnesses while walking, and both the comfort and discomfort in sewing bright clothing. Because that is not perhaps a resolution for her, the narrative seems as if can not conclude, but will continue until she and her mother reunite. There is much modern appreciation for the concept of an analytical woman artist with transcending admiration for her mother. Shin Saimdang was the first woman to feature on a Korean banknote. She and her family are portrayed in Korean drama and other media. She continued to live with her mother, but married and managed her own household, including her own seven children. Her marriage was arranged on the basis that she would always have freedom to continue practising poetry, painting and other art.

In China, in the Song Dynasty, the poet Li Qingzhao (1084 - c. 1155) helped create the idea of the incarnate, analytical and outspoken female poet writing in traditional Chinese verse. With its possibilities, she reconciled aspects of her life throughout exile, war and bereavement.

南歌子 (天上星河轉)

天上星河轉，

人間簾幕垂。

涼生枕簟淚痕滋。

起解羅衣，

聊問夜何其？

翠貼蓮蓬小，

金銷藕葉稀。

舊時天氣舊時衣，

只有情懷、

不似舊家時！

To 'Southern Song' (To sky, star river curves)

To sky, star river curves.

On earth a screen drapes.

Cold spreads. Pillow, mat, tears blot.

Stand, shed gauze clothes.

Brief, ask the night-phase?

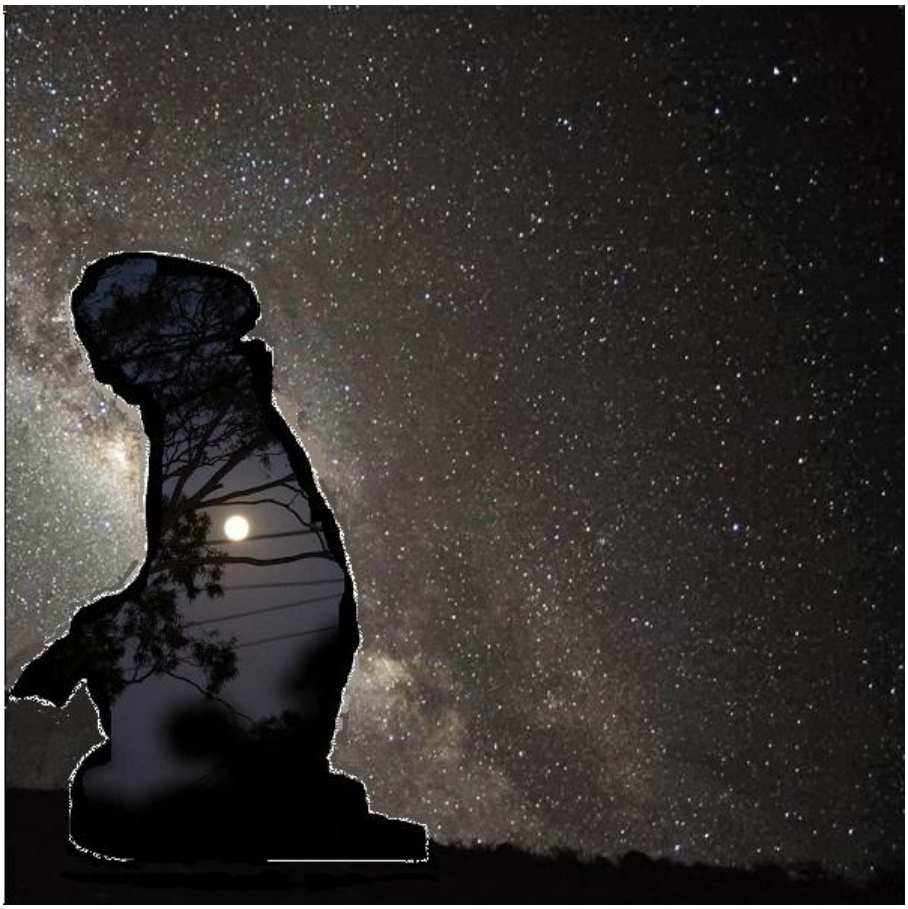
Plumes, lotus, bloom small,

root, leaf, thin in gilt.

Former weather, former clothes -

only love is missed.

Not like past hours, home!



(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to retain the form's song-based structure, meaning and syllable count.)

Li Qingzhao wrote Ci lyric poetry, created on recognised song tunes and set-rhythms - traditional verse in patterns, that tended to be named after the music that inspired it. The first line is also used as the title here. The 'star river' seems to act as a concept in itself, but it is also signifies 'the milky way', and the 'sky' it curves towards could also translate as 'Heaven'. The elements around the poem's narrator seem to offer her some sense of continuity, despite her feeling that familiar warmth is lost to her. She continued writing despite the destruction of her house in the Jin-Song Wars and, later, grieving her husband's death. She also maintained his work and an art collection they had built. She guarded art, in many senses - vigilant also in guarding the precision and 'delicate restraint' of her own work.

Earlier in China, during the Tang Dynasty, Bao Junhui (fl. 798) could also describe realities of war through traditional Chinese verse. The language's social respectability let her recite such poems to the court in her role as a poet in the Imperial Palace - in spite of her work's uncompromising messages. In China, she is recognised for her strength of character. She addressed the Emperor Dezong so she could leave the palace to care for her elderly mother. The poem below is specifically set in Liaoyang, where the Empire had an outpost defending the Northern border.

關山月

高高秋月明

北照遼陽城

塞迴光初滿

風多暈更生

征人望鄉思

戰馬聞鼙驚

朔風悲邊草

胡沙暗虜營

霜凝匣中劍

風憊原上旌

早晚謁金闕

不聞刁斗聲

Mountain Pass Moon

High, high, fall-moon's light,

north, shines Liaoyang fort:

frontier, far, light-brims.

Gale, halo revives.

Soldier sees home, yearns.

War-horse hears drum, scares.

North wind, edge-grass, keens.

North sand hides foe's camps.

Frost freezes sheathed swords.

Wind tires steppes' plumed flags.

Soon, palace report -

never hear gong's call.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to retain the form's sense, structure and number of syllables.)

The poet's voice narrates here, appearing to be a natural aspect of the situation like the gale or light, seeming gender-neutral and independent. Natural elements halt the possibility of conflict, just as the frost freezes swords, sand hides the opposition's camps, and moon rays illuminate the home town. She shows the soldiers as not being emotionally engaged in the idea of destruction (of the people seen as the Northern Barbarians) or retribution. Instead, they wish to report to the palace and leave the war-field - the palace in which the poet resides and recites her work. She used her poetry to cast light on the burdens of patriotism from within a 'golden palace' that represented the power of the country.

Centuries later, in the mid-seventeenth century, but at the end of the Ming Dynasty, the poet and scholar Liu Rushi (1618–1664) utilised metaphor and gender-fluidity to create shifting perspectives before and during conflict. In real life, as well, she enjoyed cross-dressing. While her work that is generally anthologised today is comprised of love poems and sensual lyrics, she was adept at military narrative. Loyal to the Ming Dynasty, and vibrantly opposed to the overthrowing Ching forces, the poem below describes approaching battle in surreal and symbolic, but tactile terms.

剑术行

西山狐鸟何纵横，

荒陂白日啼鼯鼬。

偶逢意气苍茫客，

须眉惨淡坚层冰。

手无风云但悍疾，

挟我双骑西南行。

未闻马上言龙骧，

Swordsmanship

On west peaks, fox, birds, drift. Why?

Day, wild slopes, squirrels, stoats cry.

Chanced-on roamer, with zeal vast,

beard, brow grim, layered with frost,

hand lacks wind, rain, still fierce, quick,

grips me, rides pillion south west.

No word yet of Dragon's charge.

已见门前悬弓戟。

拂衣欲走青珊珊，

浰洞不言言剑术。

须臾树杪雷电生，

玄猿赤豹侵空冥。

寒锋倒景不可识，

阴崖落本风悲吟。

吁嗟变化须异人，

时危剑器摧石骨。

我徒壮气满大下，

广陵白发心恻恻。

Bows, halberds seen hung from gates.

Coral blue, brush clothes, step, step.

Vastness, don't talk - talk sword skills.

Quick, tree tops sprout bolts, thunder.

Scarlet apes, leopards fill night-sky.

Cold's falling edge can't be seen.

Winds drop, keen through dark cliff, stems.

Grief-changes need someone rare,

time's threat - sword to break rock, bone.

My strong soul alone floods down.

Old in Yangzhou, heart grieves, grieves.

视此草堂何为者，

雄才大略惟愁疾。

况看举袖星辰移，

海童江妾来迟迟。

杰如雄虺射婴茀，

矫如胁鹄离云倪。

Why look at this small house here?

Skilled men with plans turn to grief

but, at a sleeve's raise, stars move,

sea youths, river maids. Slow, slow.

Fierce as snake strikes in wild grass,

strong as swans swoop from skylines.

萃如列精俯大壑，

翁如匹练从文狸。

奇鸽孤鹞眼前是，

阴云老鹤徒尔为。

丈夫虎步兼学道，

一朝或与神灵随。

独我忼忾怀此意，

对之肆矶将安之。

Close, as souls bowed to a chasm.

Aged, as leopard cat's silk streams.

Clear sight - strange heron, lone hawk.

Old crane glides, mere, in rain clouds.

Bold man - tiger strides, learns path,

perhaps be gods-attentive.

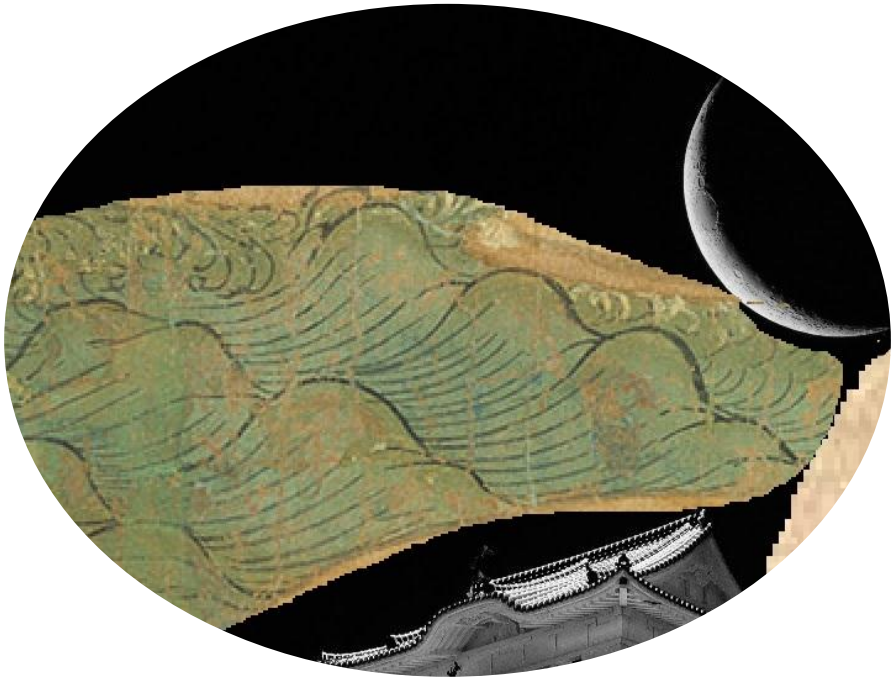
I keep such thoughts - lone in wrath.

To rocks, to stone, to rest where?

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to retain the form's symbolism, sense, and syllable count.)

This poem begins as the narrator asks why animals are unsettled in the mountains. The animals the poet invokes throughout the work had long textual history and connotations for her audience, sometimes as shapeshifting entities, sometimes as power symbols. With no word yet of an

advancing dragon (suggesting armed forces), the narrator travels south-west with someone powerful and unexpected. The narrator talks of seeing weapons (indicative of a coming battle) and animals that seem to have otherworldly characteristics. The swift juxtapositions of imagery about nature reinforce the technique in which the narrator's persona itself seems to shift, sometimes having aspects of a elderly, frail man, then, at last, of a hero who can resemble a tiger as he walks and learns the 'path' (perhaps both in a spiritual and strategic sense). The poem concludes with the narrator guarding thoughts and unsure of what will be next. Earlier the persona appears to ask for the same strength as the swan that swoops or the snake - to become efficient in tactics and effective in evasion.



In contrast, in medieval Japan there was a move away from the importance of Chinese symbolism. This suggested, instead, an importance in the existential environment and nature, something that can be seen, felt or universally experienced. Such a shift could have helped create a building sense of national beliefs and ideals for Japan - independent from traditional Chinese legend and hierarchy. Perhaps, this change also made spirituality at

one with the environment, something widely accessible, not something reserved for specific domains, like philosophy, literature or fable. The Lady of the Court in the Heian period and renowned author of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*), Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973 or 978 – c. 1014 or 1031) wrote, 'We are happy to put up with this land of dreams, with the awesome creatures that inhabit the wild deeps and the fearsome beasts that roam the kingdom of China - but it would be a mistake to take them seriously.'

In light of this, she utlises a concept of traditional Chinese in developing her titular hero, the Emperor's son, Genji. When he is residing by the ocean, exiled by court politics, she writes:

夜もすがらまどろまず、文作り明かしたまふ。

All the night, they were awake, creating Chinese verses.

(Quemar Press' creative translation)

Later, as Genji's close friend leaves him, in fear for his own reputation, they drink together, quoting a Chinese poem by Bo Juyi:

酔ひの悲しび涙そそく春の盃の裏

intoxicated, desolate tears fall within the spring wine cups.

(Quemar Press' creative translation)

Here, Murasaki uses traditional Chinese concepts to portray Genji's emotion.

In such a way, Murasaki, seems to suggest that Chinese tradition is something that can be utilised by an individual, rather than imposed by a system or a hierarchy. This would have been innovative, too, because the Heian Court considered expression in Chinese to be a privilege of aristocratic men, as opposed to Japanese script, such as that cultivated by Murasaki, and considered suitable for women.

Genji soon returns from exile and reunites with Murasaki (the work's female hero, named after its author). In the middle of the work's long narrative, they speak together on the first day of a new year. Perhaps in keeping with an intensifying national belief in the importance of the practical environment, the author aligns and juxtaposes her female protagonist with flowers from a plum tree:

春の御殿の御前、とりわきて、梅の香も御簾のうちの匂ひに吹きまがひ、生ける仏の御国とおぼゆ。

In spring, before the lady's palace are plum blossoms, whose scent blows with the curtains' scent in an undiluted land of Buddha.

(Quemar Press' creative translation)

In this land, within this situation, they exchange poems at the shores of a frozen lake, amongst plum trees in flower, blossoms traditionally representing spring while emerging through winter snowfall and ice. The phrase the 'land of Buddha' suggests that Buddha's spiritual realm could be earth, not something distant.

In scenes like this, the author seems to suggest that physical place is more connected to spirituality than are legendary concepts.

At the same time, in the same Heian Court, Sei Shonagon (c. 966 – 1025) created her 'Pillow Book', describing subjectively the environment and circumstances around her by narrative and lists. She lists what is elegant for her:

…梅の花に雪のふりかゝりたる。

…削氷…

…Blossoms of the plum in snow.

…ice cut in flakes...

(Quemar Press' creative translation)

Perhaps she uses list-making as ~~a~~ way of showing that she has the power of discernment, affirming the need for individual choice, taste and decision in a governed hierarchy. It is interesting that constructing lists in literary work also seemed enjoyable to many writers in medieval English, in texts such as the recovered manuscript known as 'Pearl'.

Ultimately, list-making could have been an incarnating device for Sei Shonagon or her readers, a mnemonic device - just as prayer beads were itemised, counted and told in her courtly society. She presented the importance and ascetics of her physical environment, as did Murasaki.

Later, Murasaki's daughter, the poet Daini no Sanmi (c 999) would write Tanka poetry, another style prominent in the court. Traditionally, Tanka poems had a 5, 7, 5, 7, 7 syllable structure. Here, Daini no Sanmi's poem contains a play-on-words, only noticeable when the text is read aloud. Revealing double-meanings was often an aspect of Tanka form. Perhaps an audience at court would guess or search for the poem's hidden meanings, as if they were participating in a court game. In the case of Daini no Sanmi's text here, the phrase 'kari no kara' ('oyster shell') can be understood when the lines '*kami**gaki no/kara** kurenawi ni'* are pronounced. Quemar's translation attempts to reflect this aspect of the work by translating *'kari no kara'* as *'nacre',* concealed in the line *'see**n acre**s away - I wonder*'. To cast light on the technique, the Japanese characters are transcribed here with the original text.

榊葉はもみぢもせじを神垣のからくれなゐに見えわたるかな

sakakiba fa

momidi mo sezi wo

*kami**gaki no***

***kara** kurenawi ni*

miewataru kana

The shrine-evergreen's leaves

don't change to autumn colours.

This Shinto shrine's fence

here is in Chinese crimson:

see**n acre**s away - I wonder.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to retain the original's word-play and traditional syllable structure.)

While the phrase 'oyster shell' could seem unrelated to the text, the connotation of an encasing enclosure might mirror the Shrine's fence itself.

The fence is red in this autumn (the colour of fallen leaves), in contrast with the Shrine's evergreen that continues to flourish in green leaves. As if the fence were taking on the colour of dead leaves in the tree's place, protecting it, and becoming visible and vibrant in the process.

Similarly, in twelfth-century India, Akka Mahadevi (c.1130-1160) constructed poems (in the Kannada language) which seem to contrast and connect the mystic and the physical. In legends about her, she escapes a pursuing and threatening king and continues onwards, to join a colony of artists who worshiped the god Shiva. The poet is often depicted as naked but surrounded and protected by her long hair. She wrote vachana poems - spontaneous and unpredictable free verse with a spiritual significance. In her poems, she addresses the deity directly, suggesting a deity can be a participant in a conversation. She addresses Shiva the way she chooses - Chennamallikarjuna, evoking the deity as tangible white jasmine.

ನೀರಕ್ಷೀರದಂತೆ ನೀನಿಪ್ಪೆಯಾಗಿ, ಆವುದು ಮುಂದು, ಆವುದು ಹಿಂದು ಎಂದರಿಯೆ. ಆವುದು ಕರ್ತೃ, ಆವುದು ಭೃತ್ಯನೆಂದರಿಯೆ. ಆವುದು ಘನ, ಆವುದು ಕಿರಿದೆಂದರಿಯೆ. ಚೆನ್ನಮಲಿಕ್ಲಾರ್ಜುನಯ್ಯಾ ನೀನೊಲಿದು ಕೊಂಡಾಡಿದಡೆ ಇರುಹೆ ರುದ್ರನಾಗದೆ ಹೇಳಯ್ಯಾ?

You are as water blends with milk,

I know not

which was first

which was after,

which the ruler

which the subject,

which the immense

which the finite,

Chennamallikarjuna

if an ant eulogise you

would not it change into the storm god?

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation.)

In this poem, contrasts start by being physical - the difference between water and milk. They move to a theoretical sense of what was before, after, ruling, subject, immense, finite. But the difference between the physical and the spiritual seems undefined and fluid, as an ant in tranquil worship shifts flexibly into the deity connected with storms and howling, Rudra (also another term for Shiva).

Akka Mahadevi and her work are revered in India, with statues and a women's university dedicated to her. This enthusiasm is for a woman who rejected traditional roles in society to define her sense of self, her spirituality, her eloquent logic and her poetry.

Much earlier, on the other hand, in the 8th or 9th century, the Sanskrit poet Vijja (or Vijjaka), used formal court-verse to describe human physicality - such as aspects of female beauty, the similarites between the experience of someone near death and someone suffering poverty, and the actuality of erotic acts. Her most famous poem is styled as a reply to the male poet Dandin, who had described the traditional colour white in relation to the goddess of wisdom, Sarasvati. Here, Vijja suggests that Sarasvati resembles Vijja's own dark complexion, as she incarnates attributes of the goddess:

नीलोत्पलदलश्यामां विज्जिकां मामजानता ।

वृथैव दण्डिना प्रोक्तं सर्वशुक्ला सरस्वती ॥

Lotus-blue is Vijjaka. Not knowing me, ignorantly

Dandin said: all-white shimmers Sarasvati.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original tone, imagery, rhythm and metre.)

In this poem, Vijja uses traditional Sanskrit with a trochaic metre and alliteration to create a deft and continuous atmosphere, suggesting song-like confidence in her refutation of the accepted appearance of Sarasvati. Vijja writes about the inaccuracy of describing Sarasvati as entirely white. As well as offering 'Lotus-blue' as the opposite of 'all-white' here, perhaps 'not all-white' suggests a spectrum of shades that could be attributed to the goddess, so that Sarasvati might resemble her and other women with dark complexions in her society.

Vijja's life is a subject of speculation - she was known as different names and sometimes rumoured to be the wife of an Indian ruler. Her verse, however, is still quoted vibrantly, in celebration of the idea of a woman who defined a god through the concept of herself and her skin.

Also defining new dimensions in spirituality, the Kashmiri poet Lalleshwari (1320–1392) created a space for poetry to emphasise the life of the spirit. In

this process, she founded the Vatsun poetic style. Her work is regarded as the earliest composition in the Kashmiri language.

Her style was focused, observing the self, with words keeping pace like a chant, but without deliberate metre, perhaps to affirm spiritual timelessness:

आयस वते गयस वते

स्यमंज़ सोथै लूसम दोह

चंदस वुछुम त हार न अते

यथ नावि तारस दिम क्या बोह

I came this way, I went another way.

Mid foreshore,

the light disappeared. Now I have no barter shell, and

what boat will carry this soul across?

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original succinct, communicative and condensed tone.)

Progression is a result of narrative action here, rather than time, just as the narrator in the poem has come by one road, and speaks of leaving by another. Without a shell to pay the fee for a boat, she wonders what will carry her forward, across the waterscape around her and over spiritual depths.

In one sense, this poem seems to refer to a belief of her Hindu religion - that someone recently dead waits on a foreshore to cross the water, using token money or a symbolic artefact representing a ship to pay the fare, these being traditionally offered to the person's spirit by the family in a ceremony.

Here, she expands the concept so that it may be the living narrator who stands by the water, her lack of shells to use as currency suggesting spiritual austerity or hardship, or perhaps the necessity of finding a way forward herself to her God Shiva.

In Vietnam, Nguyễn Thị Duệ (1574-1654) also acted as a spiritual and educational guide for women - who were prohibited from study or taking exams in the feudal period. In the guise of a man, she sat for exams held by King Mạc Kính Cung and achieved the highest place, becoming the first

woman doctoral laureate in Vietnam's history. Later, the King, suspicious about her gender, realised her disguise and asked her to tutor his wives and concubines. She also became his consort. Respect for her continued when the Mac Dynasty fell, and the Lê Kings and Trịnh Lords placed her in charge of education for the palace women. She returned to her hometown later, to become a monk, something reflected in one of her surviving poems:

THU NHẬT NHÀN TỌA

Trướng gấm màn the trải nệm là

Tơi bời phấn sáp lại hương hoa

Ngỡ trong đền Hán màu cung kiếm

Sá tưởng cung Tần thói lệ xa

Tiết sạch lòng ưa cô tuyết trẻ

Màu thanh tính hợp chị trăng già

Chút niềm cách trở là khi mới

Sau rặt như ngày mới xuất gia.

Autumn Day Lazes

Long sewn gauze drapes on mattress silk,

pollen powder's flower scent back.

Think in Han Temple hues, bow, sword.

Suppose Qin Court ways, rule are far.

Your clean heart loves her - the child snow.

The elder sister moon's hue fits.

Small pleased feeling, distant when new

- then as when leaving to be monk.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to mirror the eight syllable per line and eight-line pattern, and to maintain the memorable imagery and narrative timing.)

While this work connects with specific facets of Nguyễn Thị Duệ's life, there is a universality of images here, at their essence and elemental. As with other translations in this volume, this is suggested by minimising the use of determiners and pronouns, in-keeping with Asian linguistic tradition.

Until the last line, everything should have been recognisable to her audience, with images described or explained in juxtaposition with other images: the drapes are gauze with embroidery and they can be known further by the way they hang at the mattress. A Han dynasty temple is in the same discourse as a Qin dynasty court. The moon is made more knowable by the snow's presence, and the snow is more knowable by the suitable moon. Ultimately,

all in the poem culminates to describe and show the author's emotions in a single instance.

In reality, after becoming a Buddhist monk, she lived to eighty. Shrines and a temple were built to worship her as an inspirational force and as the spirit of women's education. She is revered as a seminal feminist figure by the present Vietnamese Government.

In Tamil, in the 10th-century, the poet Avvaiyar was creating verse accessible to her society, to offer new levels of education in spirituality, humanity and shrewdness. One of her most famous works, *Vinayagar*

Agaval, is at once a hymn for Ganesh (the Hindu deity with a human's body and the head of an elephant) and an explanation of spiritual process.

சீதக்களபச் செந்தாமரைப் பூம்
பாதச்சிலம்பு பலவிசை பாட
பொன்னரை ஞாணும் பூந்துகில் ஆடையும்
வன்ன மருங்கில் வளர்ந்தழகெரிப்பப்...

அணுவிற்கு அணுவாய் அப்பாலுக்(கு) அப்பாலாய்க்
கணுமுற்றி நின்ற கரும்புள்ளே காட்டி...

வித்தக விநாயக! விரை கழல் சரணே!.

Feet cool in sandals and as a red lotus on earth,

Garnesha wears anklets chiming different songs,

with garments soft, stitched like flowers,

a golden belt encircling the waist - gleaming in rainbow hues…

Atom's depth in atom's depth, expanse in expanse

within, where the spine of sugarcane stands…

Wise Ganesha! Your foot is my only refuge.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original's iambic pace and spiritual significance.)

Avvaiyar, in-keeping with her history as a communicator and court poet, uses verse to link elements of the spiritual, to sketches stages and possibilities of truth, self-knowledge and meditation for her society, juxtaposed with the idea of a deity's own physical appearance and metaphysical traits. The elephant God Ganesh is thought to carry everything benign and everything evil at his centre, as he rides upon a diminutive mouse, to show his enjoyment but control of things around him. With the deity established in physical terms, the poet incorporates and alludes to spiritual beliefs about the human body: like the spine awakening and uncoiling straight like sugar-cane, and the achievable states of bliss, awareness and honesty.

In line with pedagogy, other of her works give suggestions on how to act well and ensure emotional and physical safety. Her advice continues to be revered and taught widely, her myth is reflected in films and statues, and her voice sets a basis for modern Tamil ethics and ideals.

In India's South, in West Bengal, some of earliest works of Bengali literature were written by the poet, advisor and astrologer, Khana (c. 8th-12th century CE). Her writing is known for its common sense and its advice on how best to live, help agriculture thrive and learn about concepts of fortune.

ডাকয়ে পক্ষী না ছাড়ে বাসা
উড়িয়ে বসে খাবে করি আশা
ফিরে যায় নিজালয়ে না পায় দিশা
খনা ডেকে বলে সেই সে উষা
উঠে পড়ে খায় না
তখনি কেন যায় না

The hour when calling birds leave home

To search for food, in hope fly down

but without any bearings return,

Khana speaks: this is the dawn -

attend, that time is apt, wait not.

Go within that moment, why not

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original's pace, quatrain, concluding couplet, final word repetition and theoretical significance.)

Here, a time-space can be auspicious even if the being cannot find its bearings. Without a sense of direction to navigate, there is a benign essence in time itself here, and someone can still continue forward safely. Khana's voice speaks here, and her own name is invoked - with the same level of veracity, urgency and incarnation as the birds' call. The repetition on the end

of the last two lines, the ones that contain her advice, give it the persuasiveness of a mantra or the vitality of a heart beating.

There are different legends about her, some believe she was born in Sri Lanka. Some believe her husband or father-in-law was Daivajna Varāhamihir, an astrologer and astronomer. Some tell that he was rivalrous of her. Ideas of her are adapted for contemporary media. Her survival is the focus of a long-running popular television drama. Amid every legend, however, her words and her discerning common-sense seem to sound.

Similarly, Rabia Balkhi is considered the first female poet writing in modern Persian. She wrote in tenth-century Khorāsān (now northern Afghanistan), in the Samanid Empire, where she worked as a court poet descended from a royal family. Her work perceives the intricacies of endurance in adversity and in romantic affection.

خبر دهند که بارید بر سر ایوب ز آسمان ملخان و سر همه زرین

اگر ببارد زرین ملخ بر او از صبر سزد که بارد بر من بسی مگس رویین

Knowing how all-gold locusts rained over Job's head

and if locusts in gold rained down richly

to his head from Heaven for his patience,

mere grey metal will be the fly that falls to me

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original's form, structure, rhyme and significances.)

In these lines, the author refers to Arabian traditions about the prophet Job, in which he is finally rewarded for his patience in affliction by God showering him with gold that falls in the shape of locusts. She contrasts his patience with her own possible impatience, saying that what will fall to her could be merely a fly composed of base metal. The mood is not of

self-deprecation or self-pity so much as wry self-assessment and courage. She is sometimes described as the 'mother' of Persian verse, and as well as writing classic Persian poems such as Rubais, her work created a precedent for women writing in Modern Afghani contexts. A concept of her life became legend through poetry by the influential poet Farid al-Din Attar. In popular versions, including a well-known movie, she completes a poem with her blood despite being persecuted by her brother, after a tragic love for a slave. Her words are invoked often in Afghanistan amid stories of her resilience and poetic skill, and many women's institutions such as hospitals and colleges are named for her.

It is interesting that many medieval women poets have become celebrated as current heroes in their countries of birth. Another is the poet Mahsati Ganjavi (born c. 1089, died after 1159), who was born in Ganja in Azerbaijan (then part of Iran, and later part of the Russian Empire and then Soviet Union before becoming an Independent republic in 1991). Her birth

name was Manija and her pseudonym Mahsati (مهستی) is two compounded Persian words 'Mah' (Moon) and 'Sati' (Lady, from Arabic *sayyidati*, 'My Lady'). She was a Court scribe, but the themes in her poetry often counter strictness in religion, and express free existence and emotion. She wrote skilled Rubaiyat, such as:

ما را به دم تیر نگه نتوان داشت
در حجره ی دلگیر نگه نتوان داشت
آن را که سر زلف چو زنجیـر بود
در خانه به زنجیر نگه نتوان داشت

An arrow to our blood cannot hold

a chamber's sorrow cannot hold

a head's hair-locks link as a chain

a chain that to a house cannot hold

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original's quatrain form, repetition in its Ruba'i structure and significances.)

The poem seems to describe defiance of oppositions such as an arrow or sorrowful chamber and develops into the locks of human hair which however serve not to bind to a house or institution.

Here the ruba'i's repetitive structure creates a context of freedom, reinforced in memory by the end line repetition. This consistent resurgence and juxtaposition of the line's end makes it seem like a refrain that could continue - be applied to other ideas and expand the emancipatory context surrounding the poetic voice, a voice in which the reader also shares, as the poet uses the first person plural at the poem's beginning.

On another level, if it is unsure to whom the first person plural refers, apart from the poet, that ambiguity itself could be an aspect of the text's sense, and this inclusive spirit could always be inviting countless to consider themselves as one with the author, be they sole reader or nation - just as they have done.

In Shiraz, the poet, prose writer and Injuid princess Jahan Malek Khatun (c. 1324) wrote with dramatic complexity despite satire of her work and criticism of her passionate love lyrics because of their female viewpoint. Her work encompasses different rulers, suggesting at once her longevity and the topicality of her perspective. As well as overcoming misrepresentations of poetry, she was also aware of power's dispossession of ruling figures and politicians, having been brought up by her uncle after her father was deposed. She gave herself the pen name 'Jahan' - the world, the universe - a meaning upon which she builds, calls and reflects throughout her lines, as if the artist has the scope, humanity and resilience of an entire world.

پرسی ز من که چونی ای دوست بی تو چونم

تا روز از دو دیده هر شب میان خونم

خونم ز هجر در دل افکندهای و آنگاه

داری مرا ز دیده چون اشک سرنگونم

ابروی تو به شوخی بربود دل ز دستم

وز چشم و زلف تا کی داری به صد فسونم

تا چند بی دل و یار در کوی هجر گردم

چون نیست وصل ممکن دل باز ده کنونم

هر لحظه بی وصالت از عمر میشود کم

هر دم ز درد هجران غم میشود فزونم

زلفش به سوی سودا دل میکشد ز لعلش

یک بوسه گر دهد یار ساکن شود جنونم

قدی الف صفت بود اندر جهان خوبی

ما را ولی فراقش کردهست همچو نونم

Ask my state without you, companion.

Blood from both eyes each evening until dawn,

blood hurled from the heart in turmoil.

You own me, as eyes by tears are overthrown.

Playing, your face turned to my heart then.

Your locks of hair and eyes agitate with a hundred charms.

For how long to wander streets and gateways without heart and lover?

When the heart cannot possibly connect, allow it to return.

Every instant without meeting will narrow my existence

and expand each pain in breath of sorrow and separation.

His locks of hair direct the heart towards longing, from the lips is set alight

by the sole kiss, a blaze. Grant it to me, a dweller in madness, companion.

His stature has the greatness of the alphabet's tallest letter, for the world,

but compared with that our parting gives me none.

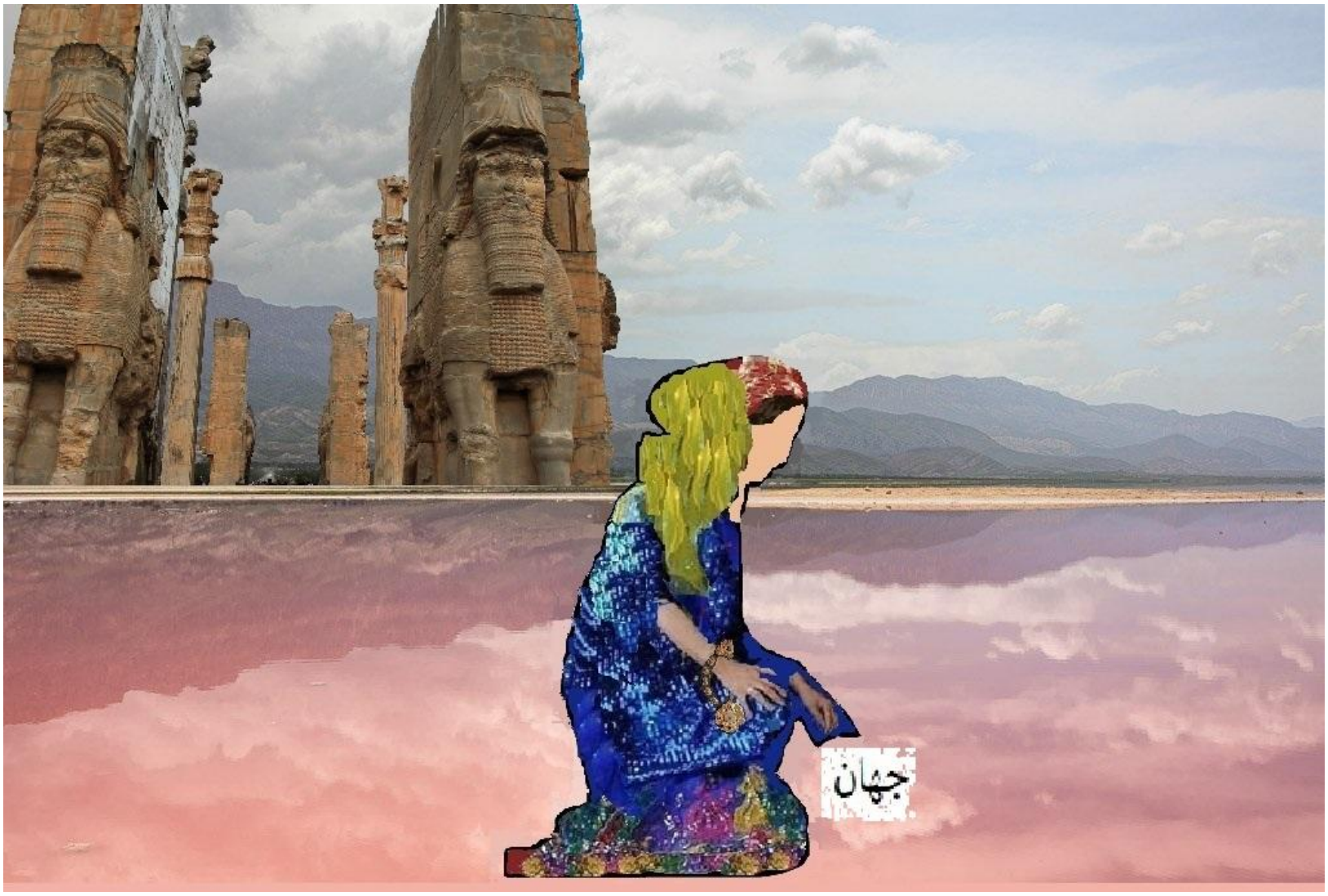
(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original's end rhyme, feeling of spontaneity and to make specific concepts accessible in a more general context.)

She is 'Jahan' here too - the world (or universe) - the setting referred to in the penultimate line and ultimately the context for all the text's action. In-keeping with that sway or control, she asks that actions be done, such as granting the kiss' flames or allowing the heart's return. This sovereignty gives her the agency of acting, and also the agency of watching and analysing things taking place around her, as when she remarks 'His locks of hair direct the heart towards longing'.

At the same time, on a fine level of meta-poetics, she can describe entities as having the shape of an alphabet's letter, as she does the male character and herself.The original text alludes to letters of the Persian alphabet, with him as a tall Aleph and herself perhaps as the curled letter Nun at the prospect of

their parting. She describes someone or something 'within' the process of language itself, using self-reference.

Jahan's work was brought to light recently in Western spheres, with the belief that it has been unjustly over-shadowed by the poetry of her contemporary male poet Hafez.



Near Amasya (Anatolia), an Ottoman poet Mihri Hatun (ca. 1460 – 1506 AD) came to be known more for her work than for any particular legend

surrounding her, although her beauty, life as a judge's and female poet's daughter, participation in the intellectual milieu of the Sultan's Court, and choice not to become a wife are aspects of many depictions of her. Her real name was Mihrünnisa or Fahrünnisa. She wrote intricate odes and ghazals emphasising affection and perseverance - leading her to be compared to Sappho. In 1985, one of the impact craters on Venus - the planet most associated with embodying affection - was named after her.

Ol mübārek z̲ātuña her demde ṣıḥḥat yaraşur
Ol muṭahhar cismüñe her anda rāḥat yaraşur

Dār·ı rifʿatde ṣafā vü zevḳ(i)le leyl ü nehār
Ṣaḥn·ı şıḥḥatde güzel h̲ānumla ṣoḥbet yaraşur

Ol vücūd·ı nāzenīnüñden ırāġ olsun elem
Düşmenüñe h̲āne·i ġam içre miḥnet yaraşur

Teb niçün ṭutar seni ṭutsın rakīb·i kāfiri
Saña ṣıḥḥatler ʿadūña renc ü z̲illet yaraşur

Tīġ·i ḳahr ile ʿadūñuñ başını ḳaṭʿ etmege
Z̲ātuñā cürʾet vü hem bāzūña ḳuvvet yaraşur

Ney gibi iñleyen her dem ḥasūd olsun müdām
Çeng ü ḳānūn ile her dem saña ʿişret yaraşur

Ḥaḳ bağışlasun ilāhī seni ol vālīdeñe
Kim anuñ bir dānesisin saña rif'at yaraşur

Ḥamdülillāh kim mülāḳāt oldı Mihrī-dāʿīye
Dir görenler z̲ātuña erkān·ı devlet yaraşur

Ah fortunate being, for you all vigour fits.
Ah for your body's purity all succour fits.

Day and night, to thrive, dwell lavishly in delight,
to speak in a courtyard with a beautiful woman fits.

Ah suffering be cast from your body,
and for your foe to reside in sorrow or pain fits.

For what does fever grasp you, why not your faithless rival.
Health for you, for your enemy grief or shame fits.

The sword's rage could behead enemies.
The olive tree powering bravery to your arm fits.

Those envious moan ever as a flute made of reeds,
while for you ever drink and a zither and harp tune fits.

Divine justice, let you live for your mother,
for her you are all, for you the highest level here fits.

Thanks be to God that Mihri came to meet you.
To perceive the divine olive tree, to serve the state, fits.

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original's double end-rhymes, effective repetition and building of persuasive and empathetic argument.)

With the idea of what is apt, just or appropriate here, Mihri Hatun creates an intricate narrative space that entails a past (where what is appropriate may have been taking place before the person she addresses became ill), and also a future (where what is appropriate is possible).

Unlike some traditional prayers (such as 'God, may you bless this child'), the poet's direct focus is always the unwell person to whom she speaks - the infirm one is not objectified to the grammatical third person but is always second person.

In modern contexts, translations of her words shift interpretations and uses, perhaps showing a universality and a versatility in her focus (her attentiveness to a beloved 'other'). Her most famous quote, 'At first glance, I

loved you with a thousand hearts' is engraved on jewellery and used to address newborn babies, but her work has many other enduring facets and expertly-honed techniques.

Ulayya bint al-Mahdi (777-825), poet, composer and singer, was born in Baghdad in the Abbasid Empire, a Princess and a daughter of the third Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi and of his concubine Maknūna. Ulayya's father died when she was a child, and she was raised by her brother, the Caliph Harun Arrashid. She married a prominent member of another branch of the dynasty, but this seems to have been a formal power arrangement. She would set her poetry to music she

composed. Her poetry is known for wittily subverting the Court structure and hierarchy, as it was often addressed to a slave with whom she was in love but forbidden by the Caliph from mentioning.

صَحائِفُنا إِشارَتُنا

وَأَكثَرُ رُسلَنا الحَدَقُ

لِأَنَّ الكُتبَ قَد تُقرا

وَلَيسَ بِرَسلِنا نَثِقُ

These sheets are signals for us,
our glances are our envoys,
since what is written can be read by others
and we do not trust the messengers we send

احتفظت باسم حبيبي وبقيت أردده لنفسي.

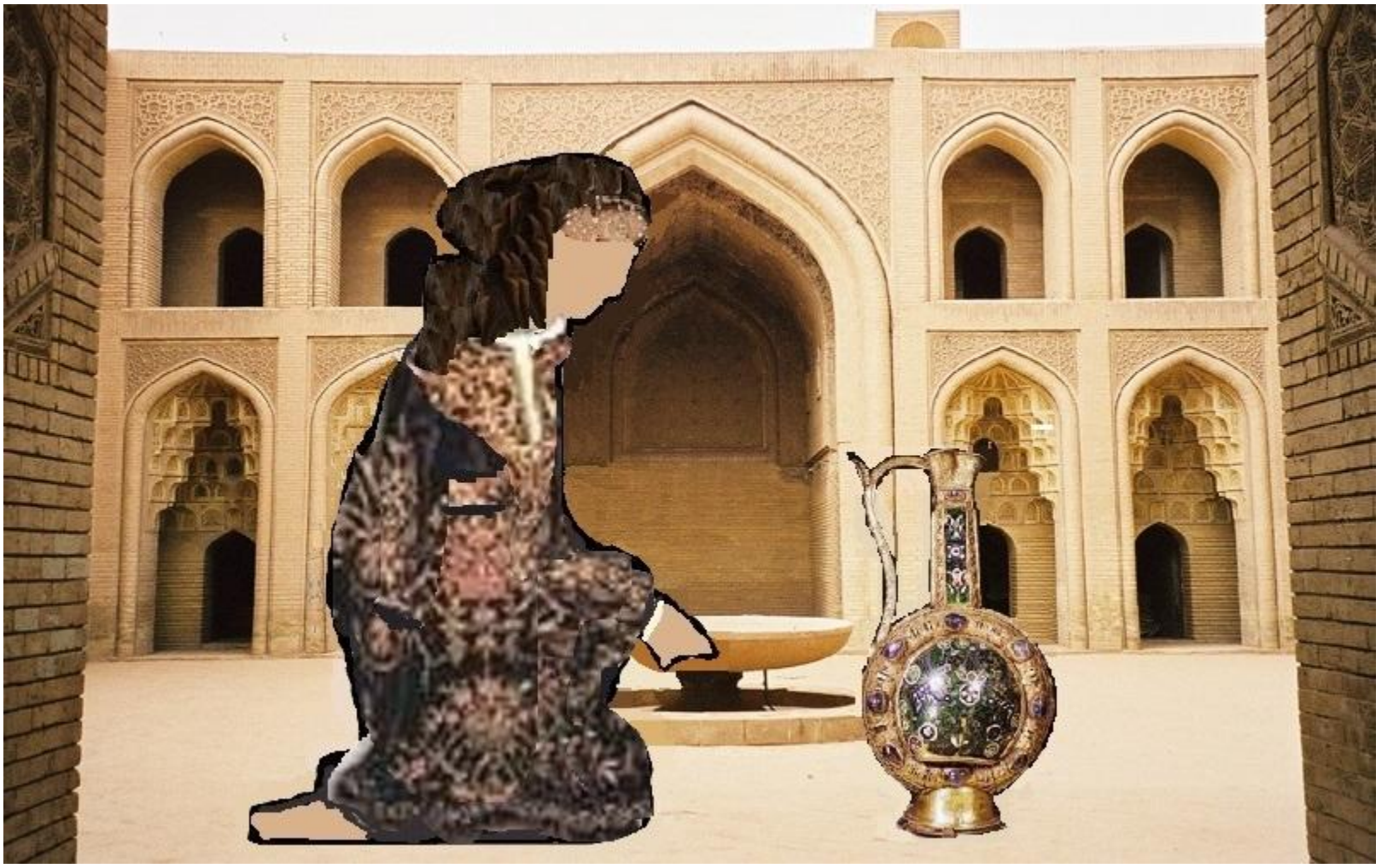
يا شوقي لمكان خلا لأبقى باسم حبيبي أنادي.

I kept my darling's name with me, to repeat to myself in secrecy.
Oh! Longing for a place so empty to cry my darling's name there openly

(The above are Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the originals' rhyme structure, repetition, narrative voice and significance.)

In these poems, she creates a concept of secrecy and intimacy in the medium of poetry written for a public, if family, audience, as when she writes 'our glances are our envoys,/since what is written can be read by others'. In this way, perhaps she compensated when she was disallowed from discussing her beloved in conversation, by using her poems to keep him as a subject of her public discourse. In the first poem, the use of first person plural seems to give herself and her beloved a unified and equalising viewpoint, both wary of those they do not trust. Soon, the Caliph renounced his ban and presented her with her enthusiastic beloved as a gift.

She is still viewed as a great and prolific voice of that artistic and tolerant Caliphate.



Armenia's first recognised female poet and composer, Sahakdukht, wrote in the early 8th century. In light of Armenia's Orthodox Christian tradition, her work praises the Virgin Mary. At once, it also blends the subject of Mary with the author's persona and voice, giving her only surviving poem a unique quality: in addressing Mary she also describes herself and her relating to the divine, in equalising and reverential communication. Here, the worshiper seems to fuse with the worshiped.

She was educated in the city of Dvin, at a cathedral school with her brother, the music theorist and composer Stepanos Siunetsi. She lived as an ascetic in a grotto cave in Garni valley, where her work as writer, teacher and composer of music seemed to interconnect. She used the grotto to create a school of music, and there are legends that those distressed and in need of counsel would visit her to be comforted by her playing, giving her the title of the 'Mother of Music Therapy'.

Սրբուհի՛ Մարիամ

Սրբուհի՛ Մարիամ,
Ամենայական տաճար
Եւ կենարար բանին ծրնող և մա՛յր.
Օրհնեա՛յ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Անդաստան հոգևոր և համապայծառ ծաղիկ,
Որ ի հոգեհոս անձրևէն՝ հովանաւորեալ ի քեզ,
Պրտղաբերեցեր ի հօրէ՝ յայտնեալ մարդկան.
Օրհնեա՛յ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Հաստատութիւն երկնի և երկրի,
Կենդանութեանց բաշխող,
Որ աստուածային լուսով ճառագայթիւքրն վայր իջեալ՝
Վերականգնեաց ըզնախահայրն ի գլորմանէ.
Օրհնեա՛յ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Աստանօր երկինք ի յերկրի երևեցար
Եւ վեհագոյն քրրովբէից,
Որ զերկնային զօրացն ըզտէրն
Ի գիրկս քո բարձեալ կրեցեր.
Օրհնեա՛յ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Կենացն փայտիւն հորդեցեր մեզ ճանապարհ
Ի սրովբէափակ պահպանութենէ
Եւ զբոցեղէն ըզսուրըն կապտեցեր.
Օրհնեա՛յ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Դո՛ւռն երկնից և է՛ջք աստուծոյ,
Խաղաղութեա՛նց միջնորդ,
Որ զնախամօրըն զԵւայի բարձեր զերկունըս՝
Տիրացեալ մահուն.
Օրհնեա՛յ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Ուրա՛խ լեր, բերկրեա՛ղ, տէր ընդ քեզ ասելով
Էղ բազմութիւնք հոգեղինացըն
Հրաշալի ձայնիւ երգեն քեզ ըզբերկրումըն.
Օրհնեա՛ղ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Հիւթական, եղական, անեղ բանին բընակարան,
Որ ըզհուրն աստուածութեան
Յորովայնի քում ընկալար և ոչ բոցակիզար
Որպէս որմըն ըզմորենին,
Այլ ծնար զաստուածըն բոլորից.
Օրհնեա՛ղ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Խորհուրդ կենաց և փրկութեան
Վերաթևող եղեր աշխարհի.
Երազապէս բարձրացուցեր ըզհողեղէնքս ընդ հոգեղէնսըն,
Ի բնակութիւնըս հրեշտակաց.
Օրհնեա՛ղ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Տո՛ւք ըզփառըս ի բարձունըս
Թագաւորին յաւիտենից,
Որ եկն և մարմնացաւ ի սուր կուսէն
Եւ փրկեաց զարարածըս ի մեղաց.
Օրհնեա՛ղ ես դու ի կանայս,
Բերկրեալ տիրամայր և կո՛յս:

Sacred Mary

Sacred Mary

temple incorruptible

and of the life-giving word, parent and mother

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

A field's spiritual and resplendent flower

that within the soul, rain protected

fruitfully revealed the father of mankind

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Heaven supporting and earth.

The bestower of animals,

that divine illumination shining descended.

She restored the father to his writing

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Appeared you from heaven to the land of this place

and from the highest cherubs.

The army of heaven rules.

In my arms I carried you

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Kept on our path, the tree of life overflowed

guarded by seraphim,

and flames turning in heart to blue

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Divine palace and God's descent

mediator that

lord protector on whose chest I rest my head

the one that ruled over death

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Utter joy, rejoice, God is with you

to the crowds tell it

the miraculous soul sings to you

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Kindled material created

from what was not

created

born from womb

unique entirely

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

Here, to the world

thought, existence and grief

rises the soul

to my house angels came

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

To rejoice ever

the highest king incarnate,

protected by the virgin's sword

from harm

to me, blessed of women

joyous mother of the Christ-child and virgin

(The above Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the originals' stanza structure, refrain, acrostic first line in each stanza and unusual blending of authorial voice and subject matter.)

Sahakdukht threaded her ownership, possession or persona through these verses, where the first letter of each stanza creates an acrostic of her name - giving her words a new sense of skill and deliberation. At the same time, the poem addresses the divine in the same tone it addresses her audience to relate the Orthodox tradition of Mary and the Christ-child, and her interpretation and experience of it.

Throughout this collection, there is an image of a female figure who continues existing, creating or problem-solving and is surrounded by uncertain elements, conflicts, confected hierarchies or changeable societies, as she watches the seasons of the beauty around her.

In light of this, the final work here goes full-circle, back to Joseon Korea, and translates another poem by Heo Nanseolheon:

秋夜曲

蟪蛄切切風瀟瀟
芙蓉香褪永輪高
佳人手把金錯刀
挑燈永夜縫征袍
玉漏微微燈耿耿
罹幃寒逼秋宵永
邊衣裁罷剪刀冷
滿窓風動芭蕉影

Autumn's night song

Cicadas urgent, urgent, and winds whistle, whistle,

lotus' scent fades, high the wheel eternal.

A beauty handles an inlaid gold blade,

lights lantern, night eternal, sews frontier coat -

jade waterclock, gentle gentle, lantern alight, alight -

suffers cold shelter, compels autumn night eternal.

Hem cut, complete, the cutting blade cools.

Window full with winds, plantain's moving shadow

(The above is Quemar's creative Modern English translation, which tries to reflect the original cheolgu's seven-syllable line structure by creating a seven-word line structure, and to mirror the phonetic repetition of certain Hanja characters, some of which become compounds in the original.)

The song aspect of the poem's title could give this text the semblance of a sustaining work-song. Such steadfastness could also be reflected in the 'eternal wheel', perhaps a reference to the Buddhist 'continuity of being'.

In this poem, all things around the female protagonist can be inconstant, fade like scent, be ineffective as a cold shelter, but she remains as constant as the waterclock, the wind or the lantern alight and shining as a moon through ceaseless shadow.