

JAPANESE LITERATURE – Early Modern Period

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chōnin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

POETRY

Tokugawa Literature and the Role of Poetry

Notwithstanding its iconic culture of pleasure-seeking, the Tokugawa period witnessed a flourishing of cultural pursuits across the spectrum. There emerged sophisticated connoisseurship, exquisite aesthetic sensibilities, and masterful arts and crafts of every description. The literature of the period clearly reflects the intersection of refinement and vulgarity, the spiritual and the mundane.

For one thing, Tokugawa literati were understandably inspired by the look and feel of their society— the world of merchants and money-making, stylish amusements, romance and escapism, and the comic posturing and hypocrisy of smug samurai. Poetry, the centerpiece of Japan's age-old literary tradition, was in evidence. But the cumulative effect of a millennium of stultifying rules and conventions had taken its toll. The new social order called for fresh inspiration and up-to-date avenues of poetic expression. The key figure here is Matsuo Basho, a Japanese cultural icon of the first magnitude.

Bashô and the Haiku Moment

In this land of poets, Matsuo Bashô (1644-94) stands head and shoulders above the rest, and he surely ranks among the great Japanese cultural ambassadors to the world. The head of a poetic coterie, Bashô mastered a genre of group-centered poetic composition— *haikai*— which grew out of a prominent medievallinked-verse genre, *renga*. The idea here is for like-minded poets to produce ‘collective’ poetry through the spontaneous composition of poetic verses, in a round-robin format.

Mastery of this genre required intimate familiarity with the expanse of Japan’s poetic tradition and unswerving dedication to perfecting one’s art. This was Bashô’s achievement. But the man is far better known in our own day for his individual haiku poems— those seventeen-syllable poetic morsels said to embody transcendent meaning. In short, Bashô has been canonized as the ‘god of haiku.’

Yet Matsuo Bashô by no means invented the haiku. It is essentially a truncated *waka*— the orthodox 5-7-5-7-7 poetic form, minus the final 7-7 syllable lines. But his mastery of this minimalist form has achieved almost mythic proportion. An oft-cited example is the following:

<i>furuike ya</i>	The ancient pond
<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>	A frog jumps in
<i>mizu no oto</i>	The sound of water

Frogs, alas, had not been welcome in the refined, courtly *waka* domain of the Heian period. But these and other humble creatures and ordinary objects would become the raw material of artistic creation in the hands of this master poet who realized that the world of poetic expression had to expand beyond the confines of courtly elegance and propriety.

Another iconic haiku, among thousands that Bashô composed, can be said to valorize the poetry of old and the elegant melancholy embodied in the medieval aesthetic of *sabi*:

<i>kareeda ni</i>	On a withered branch
<i>karasu no tomarikeri</i>	A crow has come to perch—
<i>aki no kure</i>	Autumn dusk

How, then, are we to understand the ‘haiku aesthetic’ suggested by Bashô’s verse, which subjects a humble image— be it frog or crow— to a certain alchemy of transformation? In one reading, the seemingly random, unremarkable incident takes on deep meaning— a poetic intersection of the infinite and the instantaneous, requiring no explication, no commentary, and calling forth a spiritualized sense of enlightenment, *satori*.

Others, though, might opt for a less transcendent response to these seventeen syllables. They will examine the frog and crow and find— precisely nothing at all. The more cynical among us will choose to dismiss the ‘haiku mystique’ as a game of smoke and mirrors, a Ponzi scheme of hyper-inflated value based on little more than hero worship, with no basis in actual literary merit.

What, after all, makes for a ‘good’ haiku? Beyond the received wisdom of a tradition that separates the wheat from the chaff, how are we to judge? For those drawn to haiku merely as a ‘fun activity,’ judging quality is beside the point. One can easily think of haiku as mere word doodles— oriental limericks, so to speak. After all, there are computer programs that can generate them instantaneously, and in massive quantities.

Bashô himself was likely spared such doubts. Thanks to the accounts of his many disciples, we know that their mentor was deeply beholden to a tradition that he had inherited, lamenting only that poetic practice had fallen on hard times. And despite his attempts to expand the horizons of poetic composition, Bashô insisted on dedication to mastering one's poetic craft and respect for the artistic standards of revered forebears. One such figure was Saigyô, the great poetic wanderer of the early medieval period. Among Bashô's greatest literary achievements are his poetic travel diaries, which trace his sojourns in the Japanese countryside, following—literally and figuratively—in Saigyô's footsteps, observing the passing scene, and leaving a haiku record of his spiritual communion with the places and people he met along the way. [See Tokugawa genres: Autobiography]

Poets of the Late Tokugawa

Notwithstanding his eminent stature, Matsuo Bashô by no means exhausted the field of Tokugawa poetry. The work of three noteworthy poets—Buson, Issa, and Ryôkan—pays homage to their great predecessor while advancing poetic expression in new directions.

Yosa Buson (1716-83) was a cultivated dilettante (*bunjin*) equally adept at painting and poetry. He mastered a haiku style that privileged a kaleidoscope of images and a playfulness of spirit. The following verse is emblematic:

<i>tsurigane ni</i>	On a temple bell
<i>tomarite nemuru</i>	It has stopped, and gone to sleep—
<i>kochô kana</i>	A butterfly

Here the hushed tranquility of the scene is undercut by the inevitable *gong, gong* that will provide the rude awakening. And in the following verse, Buson, a great admirer of Bashô, provides a gentle parody of his signature verse:

<i>furuike no</i>	At that old pond
<i>kawazu oiyuku</i>	The frog is growing old
<i>ochiba kana</i>	Among fallen leaves

Another perennial favorite is Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), whose haiku evoke a gentle, childlike innocence with which he has long been identified. The following verse puts our reliable amphibian to a new poetic use:

<i>yasegaeru</i>	You, skinny frog—
<i>makeru na issa</i>	Don't give up just yet.
<i>kore ni ari</i>	Issa's here!

The crafted artlessness of Issa's haiku, which seeks to cheer up the downtrodden creature, contrasts with the work of Priest Ryôkan (1758-1831). Ryôkan, who never strayed far from his home in the provinces, was a Zen priest known for using poetry as a vehicle for spiritual awakening. Together with Bashô and Issa, Ryôkan was regarded as an avatar of enlightenment and essential wisdom by generations of admirers and spiritual seekers—Japanese and foreign alike. The following poem, a *waka*, speaks to his poetic roots:

<i>yo no naka wa</i>	Our life in this world—
<i>nani ni tatoen</i>	To what shall I compare it?

yamabiko no To an echo
kotauru koe no Resounding through the mountains
munashiki ga goto And off into the empty sky

While presenting a Zen image of vast emptiness as its 'answer,' the poem's rhetorical question is an allusion to a famous *waka* from the great eight-century *Man'yōshū* anthology. A village priest of early nineteenth-century Japan, Ryōkan thus inscribes his name in a poetic genealogy going back twelve centuries.

Haiku in the Modern Day

Haiku underwent a significant transformation in the modern period, emerging as an accessible form of poetic expression across all sectors of Japanese society. And its easy adaptability has made this iconic cultural export a popular vehicle for creative wordplay world-wide, in all languages and across the social spectrum. The old rules and conventions need no longer apply. What counts is an interest in looking at one's world in fresh, new ways.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

In view of its simplicity, on the one hand, and the deep lyrical tradition that has inspired it, on the other hand, how are we to read, understand, and appreciate haiku poetry? Should we be concerned about that which is lost in translation?

What qualities may be said to distinguish a 'good' haiku from a 'bad' one? Is it possible to make such judgments?

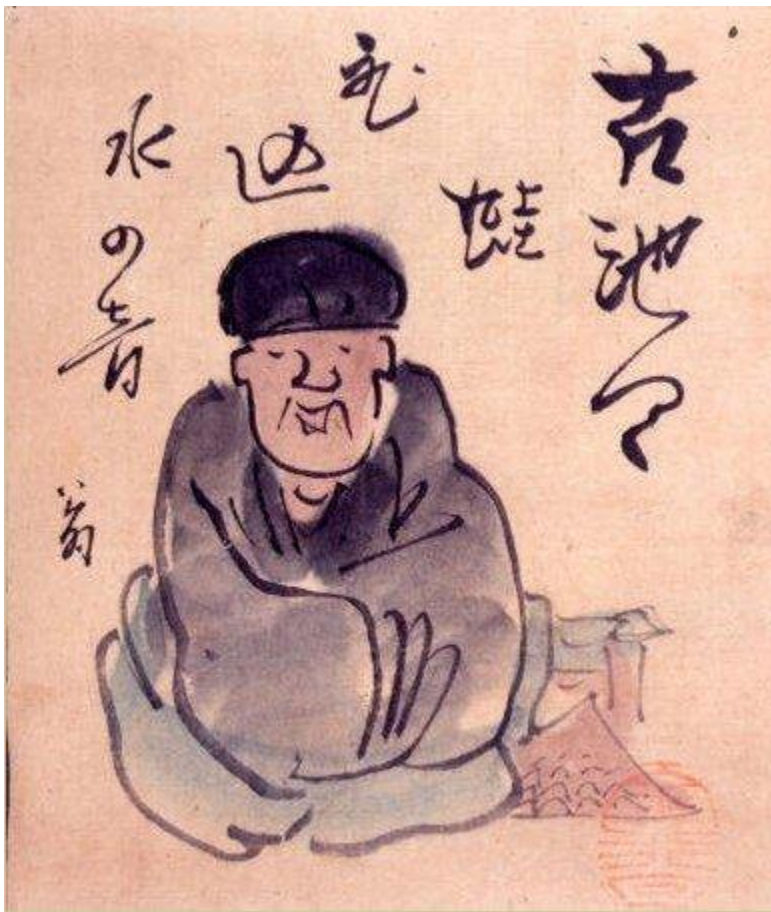
In what sense can haiku poetry be considered a 'modern' genre? A 'Japanese' genre? How would you define 'haiku' and the sort of 'vision' that it calls forth?

How do our haiku examples compare with the *waka* poetry of the Heian and medieval periods? How are the respective social and cultural contexts revealed?

As with the poets of earlier periods, Tokugawa poets generally worked in groups, preferring the linked-verse practice that downplayed individual creativity in favor of the collective voice. What questions does

this raise regarding the nature of poetry and aspects of Japanese society and culture that appear to privilege group identity and conformity?

Images



Whimsical portrayal of Matsuo Bashō and his famous 'frog' haiku, by Kinkoku (circa 1820)



Statue of Bashō in Hiraizumi, Iwate Prefecture (site of a famous haiku composition)



Image of Yosa Buson by Matsumura Goshun (late 18th century)



Image of Kobayashi Issa by Muramatsu Shunpo (early 19th century)

Note: The source for the above images is Wiki Commons.

DRAMA

Tokugawa Culture and the Role of Drama

Given the centrality of entertainment and spectacle in the *chônin*-centered society and culture of Tokugawa Japan, it is only natural that theater would prove attractive—and profitable. Closely associated with the pleasure quarters and its burgeoning leisure economy, Tokugawa drama centered on two related theatrical genres—puppet theater and kabuki. Nothing could rival the appeal of lavish productions featuring famous actors and dramatic scenes on the kabuki stage, and the virtuoso puppetry of *bunraku*, also known as *jôruri*. These seemingly disparate stage genres were in fact intimately interconnected. Indeed, plays initially composed for *bunraku* would be adapted for the kabuki stage, and it was standard practice for actors to emulate the style and manner of their wooden alter egos. What is more, the widespread use of woodblock prints to advertise plays and publicize the lead actors inspired the creation of one of Japan's most iconic art forms—the *ukiyo-e* 'floating world' print. Again, the contrast with the austere Confucian moralism promoted by the ruling classes could not have been more pronounced.

***Bunraku*: Puppet Theater and Dramas of Tragic Fate**

Much like *Noh* drama, its classical predecessor, *bunraku* theater is a syncretic and collaborative performing art, merging literary composition, puppetry, oral narration, and musical accompaniment. *Bunraku* can be traced to a long history of itinerant performance that included puppets and accompanying stories and music. As it developed during the 17th century, *bunraku* became text-based, and the technical artistry involved in producing and manipulating the near life-sized puppets achieved a remarkable degree of virtuosity. On the other hand, kabuki would develop as an actor's theater, hinging upon improvisation, histrionics, and lavish stage effects.

Bunraku, which developed in the Osaka area, is typically associated with Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), far and away its greatest playwright. It was Chikamatsu who, at the turn of the 18th century, established a standard of literary excellence in a medium where technical virtuosity might otherwise overshadow the play's text. As with the work of *Noh* playwright Zeami, Chikamatsu's plays have been mainstays of Japanese theater as well as classics of the national literature.

Most notable are his domestic plays (*sewamono*), especially those featuring romantic encounters where the conflict between duty and passion—*giri* and *ninjô*—would have tragic consequences for the star-crossed lovers. These so-called *shinjû*—or 'double suicide'—plays, typically based on actual events, portrayed the ill-fated affairs of lowly merchants and expensive geisha whose improprieties marked them as both outcasts in the decorous Tokugawa social order and as romantic heroes. As with the fiction of Ihara Saikaku, passion figures here as an elemental force blinding its victims to social obligation and binding them together through the so-called *michiyuki*—the poignant climax in which the lovers walk to their death. Chikamatsu's genius—which has been cast as Shakespearean but shares more with the world of opera—resides not in the comic 'low' but rather in the moving coda that sought to redeem ordinary people caught in the web of utterly human passions.

Chikamatsu's best-known *shinjû* drama is *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (*Shinjû tenno Amijima*, 1721), which concerns the ineffectual paper merchant Jihei and his beloved geisha, Koharu. Devoted to one another, the couple must endure the taunts of Tahei, a wealthy merchant whose advances Koharu has spurned, and earnest attempts by Jihei's family to have him come to his senses and abandon the affair.

The couple pledge their love, thereby sealing their fate, and are thus obliged to enact the preordained suicidal ritual. In the climactic *michiyuki* scene, the narrative becomes an extended lyrical dialogue, dripping with pathos and bolstered by Buddhist images of rebirth and salvation. Koharu remarks to her lover:

What have we to grieve about? Although in this world we could not stay together, in the next and through each successive world to come until the end of time we shall be husband and wife.

Every summer for my devotions I have copied the 'All Compassionate and All Merciful' chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, in the hope that we may be reborn on one lotus.

As the drama reaches a crescendo, Jihei kills Koharu, then himself, and the chanter concludes the play as follows:

The tale is spread from mouth to mouth. People say that they who were caught in the net of Buddha's vow immediately gained salvation and deliverance, and all who hear the tale of the Love Suicides at Amijima are moved to tears.

Chikamatsu's literary achievement is undeniable. Yet for the ordinary theatergoer, who may have had little interest in elegant tropes and classical allusions, it was the stage spectacle itself that merited the price of admission—the choreographed ballet of large puppets flawlessly manipulated by the 'invisible' black-cloaked puppeteers; the chanter's moving recitation of the text; and the musical counterpoint provided by the three-stringed *shamisen*, harmonizing with the shifting moods of the play.

Arguably *the* high point of Tokugawa drama is *Chûshingura* (Treasury of the Loyal Retainers). First produced in 1748, this monumental play recounts a famous incident in 1703: The forty-seven erstwhile retainers of the Akô *daimyô*, who had been forced to commit ritual suicide several years earlier, succeed in exacting revenge on the Shogunal official responsible for their lord's demise, whereupon they sacrifice their own lives. Intricately plotted and many hours long in its complete staging, *Chûshingura* has long been a touchstone of *bushidô* virtue—selflessness, duty, loyalty, and righteous revenge—values whose 'correctness' in the postwar period has been problematic. Yet the typical theater-goer would have been more taken by the drama unfolding on the stage.

Kabuki: Stage Spectacle and Virtuoso Acting

As with *bunraku*, kabuki theater has distinctly plebeian roots, which can be traced to outdoor performances by a troupe of women led by the dancer Okuni, in early 17th-century Kyoto. Tied to prostitution, though, these performances ran afoul of the authorities, who ended up banning women from the stage. What eventuated was all-male performance, which was itself subject to codes and regulations aimed at making the young actors inaccessible for sexual dalliance. Thus, kabuki emerged as a male performance genre that in effect leveraged the imposed restrictions so as to create an actor-centered theater that exerted a profound influence on Tokugawa popular culture and its lucrative entertainment economy. Although it originated in the Kansai area (Osaka/ Kyoto), kabuki established itself in Edo and would eventually surpass *bunraku* in popularity.

Another shared aspect of kabuki and *bunraku* is that their respective repertoires belong to two categories: those based on historical and legendary sources, and those set in the contemporary period.

One of kabuki's hallmarks, an artifact of the sumptuary restrictions meant to constrain it, is the *onnagata* role, whereby male actors 'impersonate' women. Kabuki devotees have long remarked on the capacity of the well-trained *onnagata* to capture a quality of femininity inaccessible to 'actual' women. Similar claims, incidentally, have been made with respect to *bunraku* puppets—mere wooden contraptions which, in the hands of the master puppeteer, can achieve a convincing and highly moving human quality.

Kabuki staging would adapt several features of *Noh* theater—the use of a chorus and musical accompaniment. Here, as with *bunraku*, the instrument of choice is the *shamisen*. And kabuki also features a chanter who intones a narrative that recounts the action, although much of the action on stage is improvised so as to highlight the 'celebrity' actor.

But kabuki is best known for its spectacle—the revolving stage, elaborate movable props, devices that enable actors to fly, catapult themselves, and do virtually instantaneous costume change. The actors themselves are lavishly costumed and adorned with flamboyant facial makeup (*kumadori*).

As with *Noh*, *bunraku*, and other Japanese performing arts, professional kabuki actors have historically belonged to hereditary lineages, whereby mastery of one's craft is handed down from father to son. Among the celebrated kabuki lineages are the Nakamura and Ichikawa families.

The standard kabuki repertoire features well-known plays such as *Chûshingura*, adapted from the *bunraku* stage; *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), which features the heroic medieval warrior of the *Tale of the Heike*; and *Shibaraku* (Wait a Moment!), the ultimate actor vehicle, featuring over-the-top stage histrionics and flamboyance.

***Bunraku* and Kabuki in the Modern Day**

With the early Meiji period and its denigration of 'outmoded' practices and the emulation of modern Western genres and styles, Japan's performing arts went into decline. Kabuki, though, experienced a resurgence in the late 19th century, largely thanks to the brilliant playwright Kawatake Mokuami (1816-93). It was Mokuami who succeeded in modernizing the plotline of kabuki drama while preserving its chief stage conventions. It bears noting that the Meiji period also witnessed the advent of Western-inspired 'realist' theater, which has remained on the scene since then.

The immediate postwar period in Japan also witnessed a decline in 'traditional' cultural production, in part owing to restrictions imposed by Occupation authorities concerned about vestiges of militarism in performances that might extol samurai virtues. However, in line with the nation's economic recovery in the late Fifties, kabuki and *bunraku* experienced a renaissance. Both have gone on to enjoy a sustained popularity, bolstered by tie-ins with film, television, and the burgeoning pop culture marketplace.

Osaka is home to the National *Bunraku* Theater, which offers a rich performance calendar and materially sustains the demanding apprenticeship system that the art requires. As for kabuki, its 'classical' kabuki repertoire is staged in Tokyo and Kyoto at theaters devoted to kabuki performance and to the training of actors and musicians. What is more, *bunraku* and kabuki troupes perform throughout Japan, and overseas as well. And performances are regularly broadcast on the NHK network. As with many Japanese traditional arts, local and regional groups are dedicated to the performing arts, employing a range of plays and theatrical techniques.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How might we best appreciate the syncretic quality of kabuki and *bunraku*, which hinge upon an unusual degree of collaboration and coordination? What aspects of these arts are most appealing? Why? What may be said to account for the iconic quality of these arts?

What does one gain— or lose— by concentrating on the dramatic plotline (as exemplified in Chikamatsu's *bunraku* texts) as opposed to the stage spectacle? Consider the contrast with mimetic theater, which presents 'realistic' stories, characters, and staging?

In what ways can *bunraku* and kabuki be said to epitomize the society and culture of the Tokugawa period?

Images



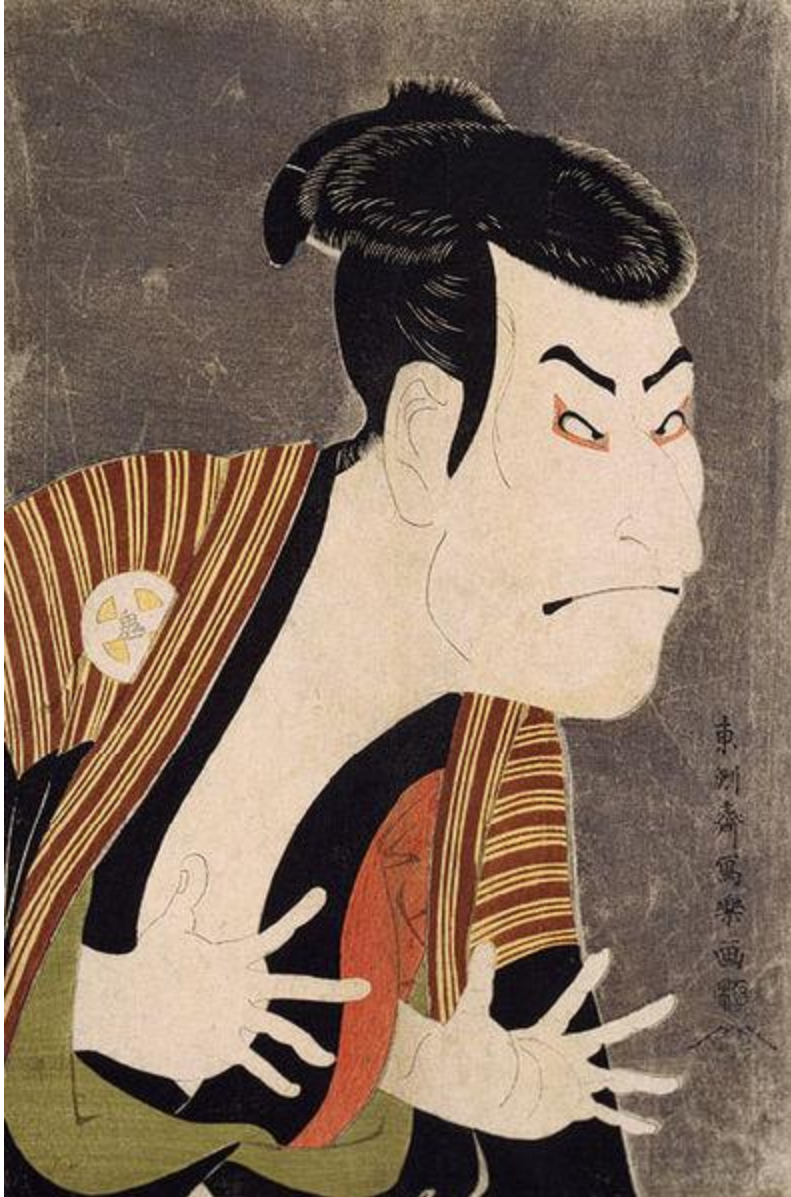
Bunraku chanter (*tayu*) and *shamisen* player



The character Osono from the *bunraku* play, *Hade Sugata Onna Maiginu*



Woodblock poster for the March 1849 production of *Chūshingura*, in Edo



Woodblock print, by Sharaku, of the actor Otani Oniji (1794)



Woodblock print, by Utagawa Toyokuni III, of an 1858 production of the play *Shibaraku*, in Edo



The Kabuki-za theater in Tokyo

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FICTION

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Fiction

Fiction writing in Japan had been in decline since the towering achievement of Heian writers, epitomized by Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*. Poetry, in its various formal modes, ranked as the dominant genre during the medieval period. Prose narrative constituted a grab-bag of accounts, written in a popular idiom and referred to as *setsuwa*, that featured historical and legendary figures. Such narratives became popular during the early Tokugawa period, under the new heading of *kanazôshi*— printed booklets aimed at a broad readership that was increasingly centered in cities such as Edo and Osaka. These booklets were a mix of fanciful tales, parodies, and popular guides and handbooks.

It was the end of the 17th century— the so-called *Genroku* years (ca 1680-1720)— that marked the renaissance of Japanese arts and culture across a broad spectrum. A taste for fiction was re-established, and its chief exponent was a virtuoso writer named Ihara Saikaku (1642-93), whose works would set a high standard for fiction-writing. Yet it was the very popularity of the 'Saikaku style' that would contribute to its gradual decline in the 19th century. What emerged was a widespread taste for light literary entertainments— *gesaku*— fostered by publishers and booksellers that now dominated the marketplace.

Fictions of Passion and Style

Tokugawa culture has long been known for its celebration of style and fashion, a reflection of the materialist proclivities of the merchant class, the *chônin*. Being 'in the know' was essential and the new culture hero was the so-called *tsûjin*, the savvy connoisseur and arbiter of taste. The 'rule of style' is most evident in the visual and decorative arts, but its literary corollary can be found in the work of *chônin*-oriented writers. The key figure here is Saikaku, the great prose stylist of the age, whose best-known fiction focuses on the sordid affairs of those who fall prey to the weaknesses of the flesh and the allurements of money. Flouting the official codes of propriety and self-restraint, Saikaku's 'floating-world tales' of passion and desire provide a stunning parody of contemporary society through the comic pratfalls and foibles of ordinary folk.

Itself a parody of a well-known scene from *Genji*, the following passage from *Five Women Who Loved Love* (Kôshoku gonin onna, 1686) concerns several young rakes who are engaged in evaluating the female passers-by:

Next they spied a lady who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, with a gracefully long neck and intelligent-looking eyes, above which could be seen a natural hairline of rare beauty. True, her nose stood a little high, but that could easily be tolerated. Underneath she wore white satin; over that, light blue satin; and outside, reddish-yellow satin. Each garment was luxuriously lined with the same material. On her left sleeve was a hand-painted likeness of the Yoshida monk, in a beautifully-wrought pose that conjured the famous passage, "sitting alone and reading old books under the lamp light." This was most assuredly a woman of exquisite taste! . . .

"What a prize for some lucky fellow!" one of the young bucks exclaimed. But his words were hardly uttered when the lady, stopping to speak with an attendant, opened her mouth, and revealed a missing lower tooth— to the complete disillusionment of her admirers.

Saikaku's lavishly-descriptive tales, which presume familiarity with contemporary fashion and taste, all but cry out for illustration. In fact, Tokugawa literary works were routinely accompanied by pictorial depiction of important scenes, and the texts themselves were rendered in a matching calligraphic style. In other words, the artfully presented 'surface' meant as much as the 'content' of the tale. The distinction we make between 'art' and 'literature' had little validity, given that narrative and pictorial elements were virtually indistinguishable.

Saikaku's portrayals of human eccentricity and self-deception possess a distinctly comic tone. The author has us look beyond the façade of elegance to discover the inevitable wart, the telling flaw. His

parodies of parvenu *chônin* and wayward samurai constitute a typology of cads, misers, star-crossed lovers, and scoundrels that recalls the comic genius of the great French playwright Molière.

One such character is Fuji-ichi, an East-Asian forerunner of the archetypal literary miser, Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge.

The millionaire Fuji-ichi lived in a rented house no more than four yards wide. He was a clever man, and his fortune was amassed in his own lifetime. . . Fuji-ichi never passed up anything which might be of use. Even if he happened to stumble, he would use the opportunity to pick up stones for fire-lighters and tuck them in his sleeve. One must pay attention to a thousand such things.

Yet Fuji-ichi was not a miser by nature. It was merely his ambition to serve as a model for others in the management of everyday affairs. . . Nothing delighted him more than watching over his daughter. When the young girl grew into womanhood he had a marriage screen constructed for her. . . Thinking that illustrations of *The Tale of Genji* or *Tales of Ise* might engender frivolous thoughts, he had the screen painted with busy scenes of the silver and copper mines at Tada. He composed instructional verses on the subject of economy and made his daughter recite them aloud.

As noted above, Saikaku's mastery of stylish and witty fictional narrative influenced subsequent generations of writers, who sought to emulate the 'Saikaku style.' But there were other noteworthy developments on the fictional scene. For instance, the Osaka-based writer Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) revived the old *setsuwa* genre with the publication of *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (*Ugetsu monogatari*, 1776). The work comprises nine tales of the supernatural, drawn from Japanese and Chinese legends, which convey a memorably eerie, macabre quality. The work enjoyed great popularity, and its 1953 film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji is considered one of the masterworks of world cinema.

Late Tokugawa Fiction

The comic spirit of Saikaku marks the work of late-Tokugawa writers, for whom stylishness and a deft comic touch were literary virtues. For instance, Santô Kyôden (1761-1816) produced many works in the so-called *sharebon* genre— 'books of style.' These centered on the pleasure quarters, the lively domain of the alluring geisha and the savvy *tsûjin*. A genre of explicitly comic fiction— *kokkeibon*— is epitomized in the work of two popular writers. Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822) is best known for his *Bathhouse of the Floating World* (*Ukiyoburo*, 1809-13). Here, the comings and goings of those who frequent the local bathhouse (*ofuro*) represent a cross-section of society and provide a vehicle for a rousing parody of human foibles. For his part, the writer Jippensha Ikku (1765-1831) produced, over a twenty-year period, a much-admired account of two buddies who ply the great Tôkaidô road spanning Edo and Osaka. This sprawling work, entitled *Shank's Mare* (*Hizakurige*, 1802-22), comprises hundreds of episodes featuring the comic pair, Yaji and Kita, whose picaresque adventures amount to an encyclopedia of mischief and comic pratfalls. Again, all of these works were accompanied by copious woodblock illustrations, which enhanced the readers' enjoyment.

One final figure deserves mention— Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848). Arguably the final major fiction writer of the Tokugawa period, Bakin produced what may be the longest novel ever written. Bearing the improbable name of *Hakkenden* (*The Biography of Eight Dogs*, 1814-42), this 106-volume epic traces, through an intricately interwoven series of romantic intrigues and heroic exploits, the eventual restoration of a proud family's good name. A mix of dramatic narrative and samurai virtue, Bakin's ponderous masterwork has been repurposed in the form of recent manga and anime versions that have been widely admired.

Conclusion

Tokugawa fiction, as with other literary and arts genres, can be said to reflect Japan's centuries-long *sakoku* policy of isolation and insularity. The creative stasis that marks mid-19th century culture in effect

awaited the sort of catalyst that would come into play following the nation's opening up to the Western world.

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Question and issues:

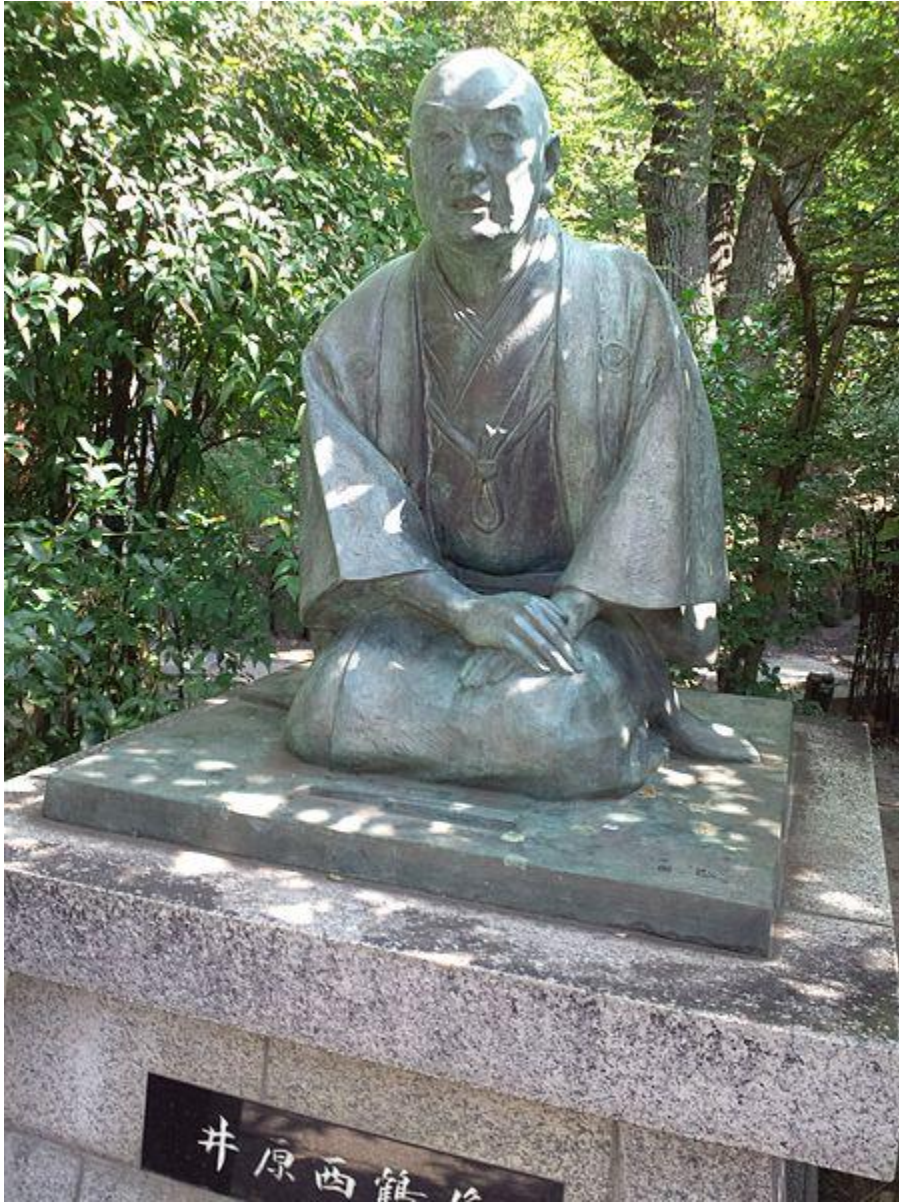
Tokugawa fiction is notably superficial, in its preference for stylish display and comic 'lightness.' What are the positive and negative aspects of such 'superficiality'? What can be said in favor of Saikaku's tales focusing on the pursuit of sexual gratification and wealth— and the inevitable pitfalls of such pursuits?

What can be learned about Tokugawa society from its fictional portrayals? Overall, what do we stand to gain from reading fiction?

Compare Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (available in a fine English translation) with the classic film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji. What conclusions can you draw from such a comparison?

As one of the three pillars of Genroku literature, how does Saikaku compare with Bashô and Chikamatsu?

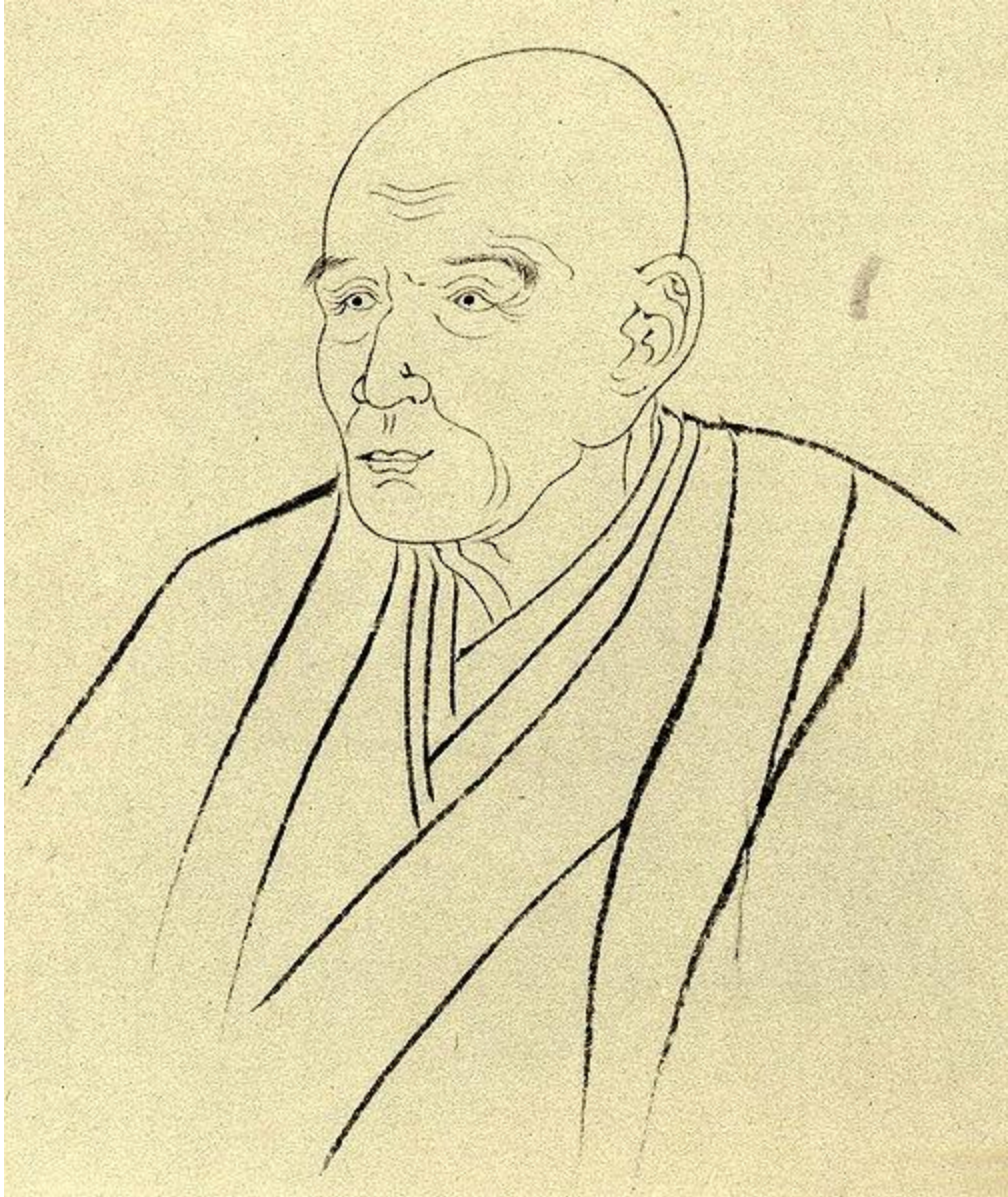
Images



Statue of Ihara Saikaku, in Osaka



Title page (right) and introduction (left) to Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsu monogatari* Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776)



Portrait of Takizawa Bakin by Kunisada, ca 1840



2005 *manga* adaptation of Bakin's monumental novel, *Hakkenden*

Note: Source for above images is [Wikimedia Commons](#)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Autobiography

Autobiographical writings were an important component of the Heian literary world. One thinks here of canonical works by women of the Kyoto court such as the Mother of Michitsuna, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu. With the medieval period, though, prevailing Buddhist values and tastes effectively silenced the strong, 'egocentric' personal voice. Autobiography— which is to say, the coherent, retrospective recounting of one's life in narrative form— had to await a new and more receptive social and cultural milieu.

As Japan's gateway to the modern world, the Tokugawa period was marked by a tension between authoritarian rule imposed by the samurai elite and a nascent concern for the individual and for the expression of one's selfhood— in terms of tangible achievements and contributions to literature and the arts. Put differently, the group mode that has typically been regarded as a defining quality of the 'Japanese national character' must somehow be reconciled with the voice of the individual seeking one's place in the world. In the West, this struggle is perhaps best represented by the romantic movement— Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his espousal of liberation from societal bonds and empowering individual expression— and by the political liberalism of John Stuart Mill. In Japan the picture has been rather more complex, in view of the persistence of authoritarian rule, hierarchical social order, and the ego-denial orientation of Confucianism and Buddhism.

Notwithstanding its extensive regulations and controls, the Tokugawa period witnessed an openness to the relatively unfettered literary expression of self. A number of writers— literary folk, political figures, and others— experimented with autobiography, which is to say the sustained, coherent narrative retrospection of the writer's life and circumstance. In earlier periods, personal narratives consisted chiefly of diary and essay writing; there was virtually no interest in autobiography *per se*. Tokugawa *bunjin*, too, indulged themselves in the full gamut of personal writing, not to mention poetry, and we need to recall that the various 'genres' subsumed under this broad heading are not discrete entities but rather overlap and interpenetrate. In short, the diarist, essayist, and autobiographer share a concern for plumbing one's inner self and giving it literary expression. At the same time, these texts reveal much of the authoritarian political context and the strictures imposed by formal regulations and the widely-promulgated Confucianist social order.

Our survey of Tokugawa-period autobiography will focus on two notably contrasting works that span nearly a century and a half. Their respective approaches to self-expression and to comprehending one's place in the world will reveal as much about the Tokugawa social and cultural milieu as the individuals themselves.

Arai Hakuseki, *Told Round a Brushwood Fire*

The author of this oddly-named work (in the original, *Oritaku shiba no ki*, 1717) is the noted Confucianist scholar, historian, and political reformer Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725). This work has been recognized as Japan's first 'genuine' autobiography— a coherent and comprehensive account of one's life and circumstances. The following excerpts are taken from the preface and the first of three 'books' that comprise the autobiography. In line with the author's deeply-held Confucian ethics, family figures— especially his father— figure prominently, as do details of his early schooling and devotion to study and achievement.

Now that I have the leisure to do so, I have set down past events just as they occurred to me. . . I have not hesitated to write in an informal style, nor of delicate matters. . . Insofar as I alone know the full story of my life, it would be inexcusable if I failed to set them down.

I hope that those who read this account, even unto the descendents of my sons and grandsons, will not swerve from the path of loyalty and filial piety. . . An old man of sixty, I took up my pen on the 17th day of November, 1716. (Based on pp 35-36)

Having thus established the Confucian subtext for his autobiographical project, Hakuseki goes on to provide telling details regarding his father:

My father's routine was always the same. It never varied. He rose at four in the morning, bathed in cold water, and dressed his own hair. When the nights were cold, my mother wanted him to use warm water, but he would not countenance putting the servants to this trouble. . .

Both of my parents were devout Buddhists. My father never neglected to make obeisance to Buddha each morning. On the anniversaries of his parents' death, he prepared rice and placed it on the altar, without troubling the servants. While it was still dark, he would sit up and await the dawn. As soon as it was light, he would go on duty. (Based on p 40)

Hakuseki makes a point of underscoring his father's scrupulously-observed daily routine, his unflinching sense of duty, and his abstemious, self-reliant nature. These emerge as exemplary traits of character that the son would emulate and in turn model for others. Hakuseki goes on to recount his educational background and the details of a political career that met with its fair share of reversals and disappointments. The autobiography is in a sense an apology for the conduct of one's life. Here is how the author concludes his account of his formative years:

If, at the age of seventeen, when I first became interested in Confucianism, I'd had someone to instruct me, I should not have been as I am now. . . I'd always been **poor** and had to borrow books from others. Anything I needed copied out, I had to do with my own hand, with the result that I read very few books. . . I have made such progress as I have because I've always forced myself to endure that which was most difficult to endure, and because what ordinary people do once, I've done ten times. And what they do ten times, I've done a hundred. (Based on p 60)

Channeling the Confucian precepts that he so cherished, the eminent author adopts a notably humble and self-deprecatory voice as he underscores the virtues of unstinting effort and perseverance.

In sum, Arai Hakuseki's autobiography eschews intimate disclosure and self-exposure. Rather, the author presents a controlled, measured, and deeply principled account of a life oriented around duty, self-restraint, and dedicated service.

Musui's Story: The Autobiography of Katsu Kokichi

Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum of autobiographical accounts by Tokugawa samurai is an 1843 work entitled *Musui's Story* (Musui dokugen) autobiography. Written by a low-ranking samurai named Katsu Kokichi (1802-50), this work retells the hilarious and hair-raising exploits and misadventures of an individual who represents the very antithesis of the warrior code of honor, self-restraint, and diligence. Katsu deals unsparingly with his dissipation and vices as he regales the reader with his many escapades—brawling, thievery, and consorting with ne'er-do-wells of every stripe imaginable.

Katsu's account ends on a positive note, however, as the wayward youth eventually renounces his profligate ways and reestablishes his good name. In the epilogue to this unapologetic account of a 'failed samurai,' he holds forth on the value to be gained from the life of a moral reprobate:

Although I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense in my lifetime, Heaven seems not to have punished me as yet. Here I am, forty-two, sound of health and without a scratch on my body. Some of my friends were beaten to death; other vanished without a trace or suffered some ill fate or another. . . Only recently have I come to my senses and begun to act more like a human being. When I think of my past, my hair stands on end.

He who would call himself a man would do well not to imitate my ways. . . In everything I was misguided, and I will never know how much anguish I caused my relatives, parents, wife, and children. . .

My past conduct truly fills me with horror. Let my children, their children, and their children's children read this record carefully and savor its meaning. So be it.

Written at Uguisudani, early winter, 1843. (*Musui's Story*, pp 156-57)

Strongly contrasting with the high-minded moral agenda of Hakuseki's autobiography, Katsu Kokichi's work presents the comic—and more easily relatable—persona of the picaresque anti-hero. Here one may detect a foreshadowing of the more intimate disclosure associated with modern autobiographical writing. Yet both of authors, in their distinctly different ways, seek to validate and affirm themselves via narrative self-exposure. And in so doing they bear witness to the political, social, and moral contexts in which they lived and that marked this age of samurai power and privilege.

Conclusion

As with other literary genres, Tokugawa Period autobiography can be said to mark the intersection of countervailing forces and influences— traditional and orthodox practices and precepts versus an emergent sense of self and new modes of personal expression. Writers were able to channel this personal voice through sustained narrative; shorter, more episodic accounts; and poetry. Rather than fixed, mutually-exclusive categories, these are inevitably interrelated. It is up to the reader to assess the qualities of the 'self' thus expressed and the effectiveness of the narrative vehicle for its expression.

Readings

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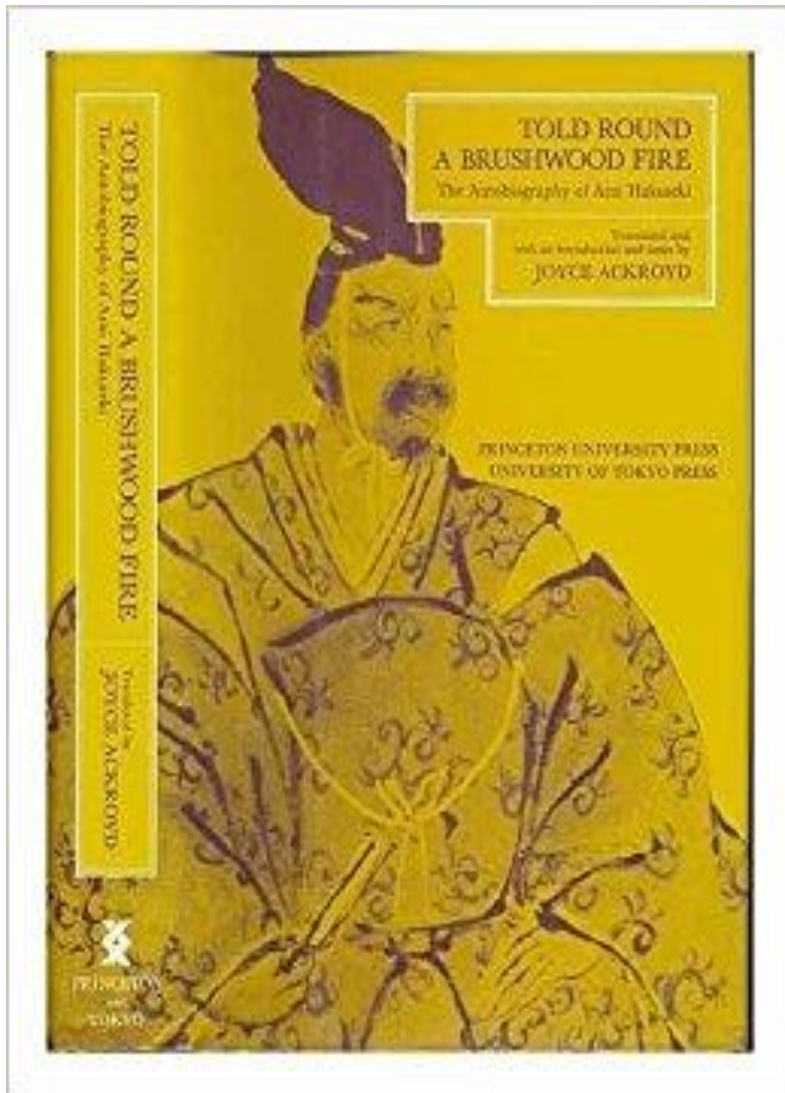
Discussion Questions and Topics

How to compare and contrast the personas that emerge in the Hakuseki and Kokichi autobiographies? What common ground can be found in these two seemingly antithetical works?

How to discern and understand the social and political contexts as presented in these two works? What aspects of Tokugawa 'life and times' are stressed here? What would you want to know more about?

Do the Hakuseki and Kokichi accounts call to mind autobiographies with which you're familiar? What connections can you make?

Images



Joyce Ackroyd translation of the Arai Hakuseki autobiography, with image of Hakuseki. (Amazon.com)

Katsu Kokichi

Musui's Story

The Autobiography of a
Tokugawa Samurai



Translated, with an Introduction and Notes,
by TERUKO CRAIG

Teruko Craig translation of the Katsu Kokichi autobiography.
(Amazon.com)