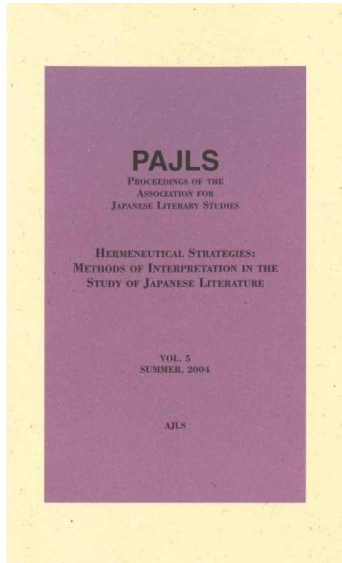
“Pillaging Theory: Feminist Readings of Japanese Texts”

Rebecca Copeland

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 5 (2004): 56–63.



PAJLS 5:
Hermeneutical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature.
Ed. Michael F. Marra.

PILLAGING THEORY: FEMINIST READINGS OF JAPANESE TEXTS

Rebecca Copeland

In her 1989 essay on Japanese women's self-writing, Livia Monnet tangles with the theoretical dilemma faced by Western readers of Japanese texts (by Western I include all readers educated in Western systems). She encourages such readers to strive for new interpretive strategies, to invent "a new critical language" that would avoid the rigid dogma of phallocentric readings and would remain flexible and open to a plurality interpretations. In Monnet's words:

> Unafraid of pillaging existing theory for insights that might clarify her vision, and support her reading of a text, the ideal, self-confident critic I have in mind would, above all, endeavor to allow the text to speak for itself, to leave unobstructed its mapping of the self and of the larger reality with which this self is interacting, to recreate the sensuous appeal to the text's 'voice'. In short, I am arguing for a non-belligerent, flexible feminist stance, which, far from making claims for universal validity, would have to be tested again and again against itself in a never-ending effort to make criticism 'somehow commensurate' with the life speaking out.[1]

The three papers collected in this panel, "Feminist Theories 1," have accepted Monnet's charge and have successfully pillaged existing theories in ways that open the texts in question to new and provocative interpretive strategies. In particular, they have used feminist perspectives to engage, challenge, and untangle the more rigid reading strategies of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstructionism—the resulting outcome being readings that invite the kind of porous, permeable interpretations Monnet encouraged.

Linda Flores begins this panel by returning Hirabayashi Taiko's texts to a female-centered reading, a reading that places the particularized, female body at the core of the narrative project and in so doing

[1] Livia Monnet, "In the Beginning Woman Was the Sun: Autobiographies of Modern Japanese Women Writers," *Japan Forum*, vol. 1, no. 1, April 1989: 56.

destabilizes the heretofore phallocentric agenda of the Marxist text. Among the several examples that Flores provides is the streetcar scene in "Azakeru" (Self-Mockery, 1927), in which the female protagonist "forces" a male passenger to relinquish his seat to her. She does so by rubbing up next to him, taking advantage of the fact that he finds her shabby garments and unattractive body so offensive, he would rather cede his position to her than endure her proximity. Flores terms the scene with playful but pointed humor a "reverse *chikan*" moment. It is interesting—and surely significant that before the scene in question we have what I would describe as a quintessentially Marxist moment:

> A brown streetcar covered by a layer of dust approaches, ringing a loud bell to warn the man who is digging up the ground between the rails. The man swings his pickax up and down mechanically as if he were a doll on a spring; he does not hear the bell and the expression on his sweaty face, languid as a high noon of late spring days, does not change.
>
> "Watch out, you fool," shouts the conductor, showing his irritation as he winds the emergency brake. The streetcar has momentum and does not stop right away; the old conductor becomes desperate. When I come out of my reverie, I am staring at the streetcar, which has stopped in the middle of the street right in front on the construction worker. They are within touching distance from each other.[2]

Here we have the archetypal proletariat—the construction worker, who has been dulled by the inhumanity of modernity—turned into a mere machine by the demands of the bourgeois quest for more and greater convenience. Appropriately he is about to be obliterated by the streetcar—the very image of bourgeois progress and mobility—the old conductor, perhaps a throw back to the fading gentry, now too weak to stop the onslaught.

But the Marxist moment is impeded and the scene aborted by the insertion of the particularized and female perspective. Hirabayashi's story is not about the abstract struggles of man and system. Her proletarian vanguard, her proletarian reality is personal, and being rooted in the body, it is gendered. Unable to escape her sex, she cannot merge with the universal (aka male) identity of the movement. By continuing to insinuate

[2] Hirabayashi Taiko, "Self-Mockery,".trans. Yukiko Tanaka in *To Live and to Write: Selections by Japanese Women Writers 1913*-1938, ed. Yukiko Tanaka (Seattle: Seal Press, 1987), p. 76.

the sexed, female, and in many cases clearly maternal body into the discourse, Hirabayashi destabilizes standard proletarian strategies and discomforts her compatriots as surely as the ugly woman on the streetcar disconcerts the prissy bourgeois passenger. Moreover by, in Flores' words, "establishing the maternal body as the site of reclamation of patriarchal right, subverting definitions of maternity as a passive and purely biological state," Hirabayashi overturns the phallogocentric dualisms of mind/body. For her part, Flores' creative pillaging of the "embodied subjectivity" of Grosz, Irigaray, and others and her deft employment of the spoils of her raid in reading Hirabayashi's "proletarian" writings, provides a new critical language that suggests an innovative paradigm for understanding this writer.

Kazumi Nagaike similarly pillages Freud in her reading of Kōno Taeko's 1961 "Yōji-gari" (Toddler Hunting), and we move from the physicality of female experience to the psychoanalytical. The plane of dreams allows Kōno to resist the maternal "embodied subjectivity" that had been so important to Hirabayashi. By refusing the maternal, however, Kōno does not insist on an Irigarain erasure—for the very denial of the socially mandated maternal agenda draws attention to its absence. It is perhaps, therefore, not without irony that this text is haunted by the specter of "Madame Butterfly"—the sacrificial mother par excellence—whose presence is alluded to directly in the story by reference to the opera, and indirectly by reference to the protagonist's abhorrence of the womblike butterfly pupa.

Kōno Taeko plays equally on a woman's assumed proclivity toward a nurturing maternity and the Freudian expectation of her natural propensity toward masochism. The latter, Nagaike notes, "might be accepted and smoothly objectified" but for her protagonist's active and aggressive desire for sexual gratification. As Maryellen Toman Mori has noted of this author:

> [Kōno's] female characters' attempts to triumph over feminine abjection, either by symbolically destroying its signifiers or by manipulating it to enhance their pleasure, manifest the self-affirming impulse that is inherent in their masochistic tendencies. If Kōno's literature has a feminist dimension, it resides in its heroines' determined, if circuitous,

> pursuit of physical vigor, psychological mastery, and sexual pleasure.[3]

In her psychoanalytical discussion of "Toddler Hunting," Nagaike concentrates on one of Akiko's sexual fantasy in which "a *boy* is being beaten."

> As the dream world spread out about her, Akiko would plunge herself into it, her pulse beating faster and faster and her skin all moist, and she would reach ecstasy, losing all self-control. Two figures always appeared in this strange world: a little boy of seven or eight, and a man in his thirties. The details of their personalities and activities varied slightly each time, but the age gap remained constant, as did their relationship father and child... *The father issues an order to someone, and an alligator belt is placed in front of him.—Take off your clothes. The child does as he is told, and the father beings whipping his buttocks with the belt... –Hit me on my back, Daddy, the boy begs. –I was leaving that till last. There is no hurry.*

Nagaike complicates the sado-masochistic elements in this fantasy by reading it alongside Freud's famous article "A Child is Being Beaten." Her reading zeros in on Akiko's scoptophilic position as the observer of an objectified homosocial encounter. Comparing this scene to the male-male homosexual encounters constructed as female fantasies in contemporary narratives and later *manga,* Nagaike reveals the wonderful transgressiveness of the text. No border in this text is impervious to being breached. And no binary is stable. The female imagination incorporates the male; desiring subjects become their own objects; the body can be rent and torn (actually) and re-assembled (imaginatively) as its antithesis.

But in the end, whether real or imagined, we return to the body. Of this trend in women's works of this era, Sharalyn Orbaugh notes:

> [B]y appropriating aspects of the gender-based power economies and inverting them, collapsing them, twisting them, and particularly by *exaggerating* them through rendering them literal, [Kōno]... (among others and in various ways) makes obvious the grotesqueries, absurdities, and actual dangers to

[3] Maryellen T. Mori, "The Liminal Male as Liberatory Figure in Japanese Women's Fiction," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 60: no. 2 (December 2000): 555.

> women that are glossed over by abstract, intellectualized narratives of power. The move of returning these narratives to the body results in what readers perceive as violence, often horrifying violence. But that is the point. By taking the power paradigms that are abstract, and therefore difficult to see, and returning them to the physical plane implicit in all of them, writers can expose the violence to women's bodies and identities inherent in these paradigms.[4]

It is the body—the female body—with its excesses and corporeality that Takahashi Takako finds so disconcerting in her 1974 essay "Onnagirai" (Woman-hating). The lumpishness of female flesh—exposed so uninhibitedly in the woman's bath—reminds Takashashi's female protagonist of her own position—lumped into a category called "Woman." Her aversion to the women she sees, who so willingly acquiesce to their abjected physicality, borders on misogyny. And Takahashi's "Woman-hating" would seem to fly in the face of any feminist project to resist the dualisms of mind/body or at least to validate the physical. But with her provocative reading, that "pillages" even as it resists the de-gendering of deconstructionism, Julia Bullock re-positions Takahashi's essay within contemporary discourses and in so doing complicates what had heretofore seemed "obvious."

Whereas Hirabayashi sought to transcend the duality of mind/body by "embodying" it, Kōno tore through the barriers the duality imposed through acts of transgression. But Takahashi reassesses the issue by undermining the very categories the binaries are thought to establish. "While she may have been shut out of the category 'male' on the basis of anatomy," Bullock notes, "by equating 'masculine' with a host of other terms (spiritual, rational, etc.) and implicitly ascribing these related terms to herself, she is able on some level to subvert the notion of biological destiny even as she inscribes it in her narratives."

Takahashi's essay appeared at a time when male critics were glorifying women for their achievements in the literary arena and were simultaneously but not coincidentally denigrating the importance of literature itself. Their arguments for female success were grounded on essentialist notions expressed in the binaries of nature/culture; body/mind; emotion/intellect and lauded women for their innate lyricism, their explicit link to their own physicality, and their closeness to the "honesty" of the

---

[4] Sharalyn Orbaugh, "The Body in Contemporary Japanese Women's Fiction," in *The Woman's Hand: Gender and Theory in Japanese Women's Writing*, eds. Paul Gordon Schalow and Janet A. Walker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 153.

quotidian everyday. Whereas earlier critics had derided women for these very qualities, critics in the 1970s—responding to the contemporary focus on women's issues—congratulated women on their perceived differences. For example, Okuno Takeo, in a book published in 1974, declared that fiction, that is "the telling of tales" (*monogatari*), was inherently the domain of women writers—given that they have "abundant physical sensibilities, a capacity for fantasy, [and] the ability to provide realistic depictions based on their family experiences."[5] Bolstered by their own special literary awards, such as the Woman Writers Prize (*Joryū bungakushō*), Okuno predicted that they would soon so dominate the market, that it would become necessary to create similar prizes for men. Akiyama Shun was more direct in his parallel between women's writing and female physicality when in his 1976 essay for *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū* he observed: "But in the depths of women's writing I find a base that might sustain me, a base which, like a mother's womb, is an affirmation of the reality of life."[6]

Whereas Kōno Taeko launches her own assault on this male myth of maternity by creating characters such as Akiko who not only actively resist motherhood but make of it something ominous, Takahashi takes a different approach. Her assault is on the valorisation of the female body as locus of desire. For her a presentation of the female body as horrifying—as a site of fear and revulsion—is an attack on a phallogocentric agenda that had defined her by and confined her to the body.

The language she uses to free herself from the body, is the same language used to denigrate femaleness as something lacking yet repulsively fulsome. Takahashi's project, while appearing misogynistic, in fact provides a bilingual perhaps bisexual performance. Women writers, particularly those of Takahashi's generation, confronted a dilemma. To cite Mary Eagleton:

> The woman writer must at once "be feminine and... refuse femininity;" she creates a woman's world within her novels while, at the same time, rejecting that world through the authoritative act of writing. [Juliet] Mitchell sees no alternative for the woman writer. She has to work within the dominant order, what is termed the "symbolic," for to be

---

[5] Okuno Takeo, "Is Fiction Inherently a Woman's Form?" trans. Barbara Hartley in Rebecca Copeland, ed. *Woman Critiqued: a Century of Reading Women's Writing in Japan*, forthcoming.

[6] Akiyama Shun, "Confessions of a Woman's Literature Convert," trans. Barbara Hartley in Copeland, op.cit.

> outside the dominant order is to be mad or dead. But equally she must disrupt that symbolic order with a new symbolism.[7]

The woman writer must learn to speak/write in the voice assigned to her by phallocentric discourse, while at the same time invent ways to subvert that discourse. Tomioka Taeko, in 1983, would describe the woman writer's task as "bilingual."

> What women write is, consequently and for the most part, determined by the criticism and evaluations of men in "men's words." Therefore, without our even being aware of it, female expression has been created to please men. The phrase "to please men," more than "men's words," means that even things made by women are in effect being made by men. Whether intentionally or not, women use "the words of men" in order to "curry the favor of the male critics." Female poets who write poetry in the "feminine" style and female authors who write works in the "feminine" style do not invite the hostility of men because they do not go against "the words of men." Words of praise from such men, such as, "You can't compete with women,' or, "Men are going to have to work hard to keep ahead," are usually said about the type of thing written in the appropriate "feminine" style, and not about the philosophy manifested therein.[8]

Takahashi's "Woman Hater" seems to collude with male critics by aspiring to "their language" in her assault on "women." But as Bullock has shown, her enterprise is far more subversive. Although her bilingual performance is so successful as to be almost unnoticeable, her occasional mispronunciations and false utterances draw attention to the fact that she is speaking in a borrowed tongue. The enmity that she seems to direct toward the category of "woman," from which she holds herself so aloof, finds it target rather in the phallocentric system that would require bilingualism of women in the first place.

---

[7] Mary Eagleton, "Gender and Genre," in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, Second Edition, edited by Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 139.

[8] Tomioka Taeko, *Tō no koromo ni asa no fusuma*. Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1984. As translated and cited in Chieko M. Ariga, "Text Versus Commentary: Struggles over the Cultural Meanings of 'Woman,'" in *The Woman's Hand*, op. cit., p. 377.

In concluding Julia Bullock raises the provocative question of the extent to which the feminist expectations of the Western scholar of Japanese literature impose themselves on the texts under consideration. In so doing she introduces another important binary into the mix, that of Western reader/Japanese text. "[H]ow can Western feminist scholars of Japanese literature offer meaningful readings of texts outside their own historical and cultural milieux," she asks. And she answers her question with the paper she has presented. We cannot be something we are not. We (as Western readers) cannot be anything but Western readers. But we can, as Bullock proves with her reading of Takahashi's "Woman Hater," offer a "deliberate and self-conscious problematization of the very feminist principles that motivate their [and I would add "our"] inquiry." We can, as Livia Monnet encouraged fifteen years earlier, offer "a non-belligerent, flexible feminist stance, which, far from making claims for universal validity, would have to be tested again and again against itself in a never-ending effort to make criticism 'somehow commensurate' with the life speaking out."

Bullock's careful presentation of Takahashi's "Woman Hater" returns us to the founding premise of feminist readings and reminds us of the importance of accepting what Annette Kolodny declared as she danced through the minefield, that we are who we are because of our pluralities, our uncontainability, our raggedness, and our refusal to be read as a single coherent category. Perhaps that is why at this conference we need a Feminist Theories 1 and a Feminist Theories 2.