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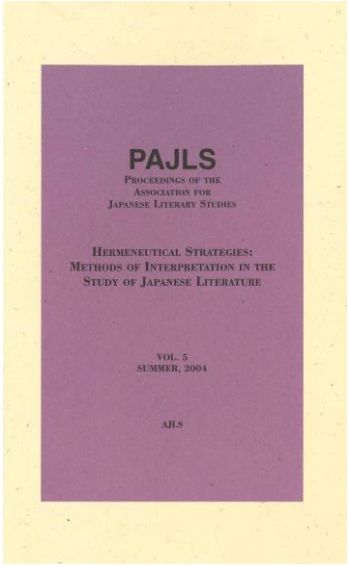

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BEYOND OUR GRASP? MATERIALITY, META-GENRE AND MEANING IN THE PO(E)TTERY OF RENGETSU-NI

Sayumi Takahashi

In the mid-19th century, during a period of great political and social upheaval, there lived on the northeastern outskirts of Kyōto a celebrated Buddhist nun by the name of Rengetsu 蓮月, or "Lotus Moon" (1791-1875). Famed for her distinctive, hand-crafted pottery and tea implements into which she inscribed original *waka* poems in a mellifluous calligraphic hand, she was apparently a stunning beauty whose quiet, reclusive lifestyle and idiosyncratic charisma inspired a certain cult-like following.

Occupying a liminal, transitional space between classical culture and modernity, her multimedia compositions embody a peculiar blend of poetry, pottery and calligraphy. Much of her corpus is exceptionally difficult to classify according to traditional categories of genre and media: one might ask, for example, *is this a literary text or a visual/plastic art*? The very hybridity of her work, poised between artisanal modes of production and the cult of the author/artist, makes us (as readers and literary critics situated in early 20th-century Anglophone academia) question how we should approach the task of interpreting and experiencing these complex text-objects.

Existing scholarship and criticism on Rengetsu-ni undertaken from a literary perspective[1] have evaluated her *waka* as largely divorced from their original material media of transmission to the reader, even while acknowledging the seminal part that such poetic texts play in her ceramic work. While Tokuda Kōen asserts that what distinguishes "Rengetsu-yaki"

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[1] The most notable examples of such largely text-centered scholarship include Murakami Sodō, ed., *Rengetsu-ni zenshū* (Kyōto: Naigai, 1927); Sugimoto Hidetarō, *Ōtagaki Rengetsu* (Kyōto: Tankōsha, 1976); and Tokuda Kōen, *Rengetsu-ni no shinkenkyū* (Kyōto: Sanmitsudō Shoten, 1958). These studies for the most part focus on the unauthorized published anthology of Rengetsu's select works, *Ama no Karumo* (1870), as the primary poetic text to be examined. One exception to this text-only approach is the passage in Sugimoto's book where he analyzes a Rengetsu flower container owned by his family—his reading of this particular piece is exemplary in its treatment of the relationship between the materiality of the object and the semantic implications of the poem engraved on it possibly due to the increased access and exposure he had to this specific text-object. See Sugimoto, pp. 101-103.

ware is precisely the fact that the nun never failed to engrave her own *tanka* poetry onto them, he remains silent on what exact role(s) this clay telesma itself might play in the alchemical generation of poetic meaning.[2] On the other hand, writings by many art historians and critics on Rengetsu-ni have treated her as a visual artist first and foremost. Consequently, they have focused on the material aspects of her pottery (e.g. color, glaze, dimensions, clay type, shape), often at the cost of explicitly analyzing or theorizing the connection between such physical properties and the literary meaning(s) of the specific poem carved or calligraphed onto a given object.[3]

Both these discipline-bound approaches outlined above run the risk of downplaying the *radicality* of Rengetsu's innovation in combining media and genres in ways never seen before. The purpose of this paper then, is to perform a more synthetic, interdisciplinary reading of Rengetsu's distinctive blend of poetry and pottery (what I shall here term as "po(e)ttery"), as a way of unearthing and calling attention to some of the potentially subversive[4] qualities of her work. In many ways, this project takes its cue from the recent transnational "Interstitial Arts" movement,[5] as well as from N. Katherine Hayles, who has advocated a

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[2] Tokuda, p. 55.

[3] For example, see Elizabeth Horton and Steven D. Owyoung, "Japanese Calligraphy and Painting (in the Saint Louis Art Museum)," *Saint Louis Art Museum Bulletin*, vol. 19, Winter 1989, pp. 1-35; Patricia Graham, *Tea of the Sages: The Art of Sencha* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), p. 144; John Stevens, "Lotus Moon—The Art of the Buddhist Nun Rengetsu," *Arts of Asia* (Hong Kong) Vol. 17, No. 5 (1987): 89-96; and Maeda Eiko, *Bunjin Shofu 11: Rengetsu* (Kyōto: Tankōsha, 1979). Among these, Stevens' work and Maeda's work are significantly more thorough in their attempts to synthesize the poems with the material properties of Rengetsu's pottery and calligraphy, but they still fall shy of consistently problematizing why the poetter might have chosen one poem in particular to accompany a given object or vice versa.

[4] I mean "subversive" here in the sense that it compels us, as readers, to question and critique our own conventional assumptions and reading practices. I do not mean "subversive" in the sense of going against a particular political regime or ideology, though this is certainly an aspect that can and should be explored further in future studies. Some critics such as Murakami have characterized Rengetsu's work as pro-imperialist and nationalist—he adds that Rengetsu was constantly being hounded by spies from the Bakufu. Sugimoto has taken issue with Murakami's assessment, pointing out that Rengetsu seems to have been critical to some extent of both sides of the Meiji struggle.

[5] "What is Interstitial Art? It is art made in the interstices between genres and categories. It is art that flourishes in the borderlands between different disciplines, mediums, and cultures. It is art that crosses borders, made by artists who refuse to

media-specific criticism as a mode of critical inquiry that remains attentive to the materiality of the medium in which a given literary work is produced. [6] Ultimately, the multi-valent, metageneric [7] meanings of Rengetsu's poettery challenge us to re-examine our own disciplinary and genre-bound assumptions and practices in the interpretation of literary texts.

We might begin this hermeneutic endeavor by asking, "what was new and innovative about Rengetsu's poettery?" In what sense can it be read as an interstitial art that goes beyond established schools and traditions of literary and material culture? In order to answer this question, we must first get a sense of the historical and biographical context behind this work.

Born on January 8,1791 in the pleasure quarters (Sanbongi district 三本木) of Kyōto, Rengetsu née Nobu is rumored to have been the illegitimate daughter of a high-ranking samurai named Yoshikiyo (良聖) of the Tōdō family (藤堂) and a courtesan. Soon after her birth, she was adopted by Ōtagaki Hanzaemon Teruhisa a.k.a. Mitsuhisa (大田垣伴左衛門光古), a lay priest at Chion-in 知恩院, a major temple of the Pure Land Buddhist sect located in eastern Kyōto. At Teruhisa's behest, from about

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be constrained by category labels... Because such works are hard to classify, they are often misunderstood in a culture that has become overly dependent on branding and selling art by category labels... Rigid categorization by critics and educators is an unsatisfactory method for understanding the border-crossing works to be found in all areas of the arts... We support an ongoing conversation among artists, academics, critics, and the general public in which art can be spoken of as a continuum rather than as a series of hermetically sealed genres." Interstitial Arts Foundation, "Mission Statement," 24 February 2004, http://www.artistswithoutborders.org/mission.html.

[6] See Hayles, N. Katherine, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

[7] "Metagenre" here signifies a third term intended to supplement, challenge and go beyond the usual genre-subgenre categorizations. Ruth Mirtz introduced the term to refer to texts that incorporate both primary and secondary genres in the Bakhtinian sense, but that also demonstrate certain institutional requirements and extra-institutional resistances in such a way as to engender a tertiary level of genre. See "The Territorial Demands of Form and Process: The Case for Student Writing as a Genre," in *Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, and Alternatives*, Ed. Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook, 1997). I would supplement Mirtz's definition by adding that a metageneric work involves a certain reflexivity that qualifies it as an experimental procedural form which strategically problematizes the often unquestioned notion of a unified, stable genre through its novel mediations of multiple existing genres.

the age of seven, she served for ten years as a lady-in-waiting to the Matsudaira family at Kameoka (亀岡) Castle in Tanba (丹波亀山).[8] There she received the basics of a samurai education, which included the study of martial arts such as swordsmanship (*Naginata* 長刀, *ken-jutsu* 剣術), spear-fighting (*sō-jutsu* 槍術), and ball-and-chain mace fighting (*kusarigama* 鎖鎌) as well as training in a variety of arts such as *waka* poetry, dance, and sewing.[9]

Following this rich childhood education, Rengetsu's young adult years were marked by tragedy and family upheaval. At the age of sixteen, she married a member of the samurai class by the name of Mochihisa (望古). It seems that he was a debauched, dissolute man,[10] and several years later, after having born and lost 3 children (1 son and 2 daughters) by him, the young woman divorced him. Urged by Teruhisa, she married again several years later, this time to an older man named Hisatoshi (古肥). She had at least one daughter with Hisatoshi,[11] only to be widowed within a few years. Upon Hisatoshi's death, she took the tonsure and became a Buddhist nun by the name of Rengetsu, or "Lotus Moon (蓮月) at age 33. She moved with her daughter and stepfather Teruhisa (who had also taken vows at same time as Rengetsu and took the Buddhist name of "Saishin," 西心 or "Western Heart") to a small hermitage called the "Makudzu-an (真葛庵)" on the grounds of the Chion-in. Within a few years, her only remaining daughter had died, and in 1832 when her beloved stepfather

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[8] Sugimoto, p. 57.

[9] *Nihon koten bungaku daijiten* Vol. 1, Ed. Ichiko Teiji et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984), p. 439; Sugimoto, p. 58. Sugimoto goes on to surmise that Rengetsu's physical agility was somehow related to her spiritual, or internal, sense of balance, and that this sense of balance is in turn evident not only in her inscribed poettery and tanzaku calligraphy, but also in the texts of the "poems themselves" (58). Notice that, even while addressing the discourse of materiality and the body, this kind of assessment still preserves an almost Cartesian duality between the physical aspects of the text and the notion of a "pure" disembodied text "itself". There is always the danger that materially sensitive analyses will veer toward physiological essentialism and/or reproduce a romantic, artist-centered "expressive" model of aesthetic creation.

[10] Murakami's text portrays him as a profligate, but Sugimoto questions this assessment as lackng in concrete evidence (see Sugimoto, p. 65).

[11] Most sources indicate that she had only one daughter by Hisatoshi (e.g., see *Waka bungaku jiten* 118), but some point to the existence of a second daughter (*Nihon koten bungaku daijiten*, p.439, and Stevens, p. 89). Such discrepancies in biographical details recorded in various sources point towards the difficulty of drawing an historically accurate picutre with respect to Rengetsu's personal life.

passed away, Rengetsu found herself completely alone in the world at the age of 42. Left with no family backing, she was forced to leave the Chion-in and scrambled to find a means of supporting herself.

Reluctantly, she relocated to Okazaki (岡崎) in northeast Kyōto (a center of scholarly learning), where she struggled for some time to attain a livelihood that would give her some measure of financial independence. She initially entertained the idea of becoming a *gō* teacher (having become quite a masterful player under the tutelage of Teruhisa), but soon abandoned this pursuit, afraid that the male-dominated world of the game would not take too well to a woman instructor.[12] She also attempted to break into the literary establishment of *waka* as a poetry teacher,[13] but her reputation as a beautiful woman stirred up strange rumors and unwanted solicitations, and soon she gave up that enterprise as well.[14] There is even an apocryphal story claiming that Rengetsu disfigured herself by pulling her own teeth out, hoping thereby to repel a host of suitors which included men from various literary circles.[15]

In short, the overwhelmingly homosocial and patriarchal literary and poetic salons of 19th century Kyōto were not the sort of world in which a widowed woman living alone would feel entirely comfortable participating.[16] In this light, it is not surprising that Rengetsu would set

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[12] See *Waka bungaku ijiten* (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1968), p. 118 as well as Sugimoto, p. 100.

[13] Rengetsu herself had studied poetry with luminaries such as Ueda Akinari, Kagawa Kageki, and Mutobe Yoshika. See Patricia Graham, *Tea of the Sages: The Art of Sencha*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), p. 144, and *Encyclopedia Nipponica 2001* Vol. 3 (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 1984), p. 933. Graham points out that not only Rengetsu's poetry, but also her pottery (which, as I argue here, are ultimately two inseparable aspects of the same thing) shows the mark of a *bunjin sencha* influence in the vein of Akinari's own ceramic designs.

[14] *Waka bungaku daijiten*, p. 118.

[15] Cited in Horton, p. 23. This story of self-mutilation resembles that of the 17th-century Zen master nun and calligrapher Ryōnen, who had initially been denied training in Zen calligraphy and meditative practice on account of her beauty (supposedly the religious superiors feared that her presence would lead fellow monks in the school astray). In response to this refusal, Ryōnen promptly burned her face with a red hot iron and disfigured herself in order to show her commitment to the Zen path and to be accepted as a serious calligrapher.

[16] It is worth noting that many male literati intellectuals who participated in *bunjin* tea salons at this time envisioned women's participation only in the form of tea-servers and/or eye candy rather than as intellectual or literary equals. For example, Watanabe Kazan recommended for *shogakai* that "those serving tea should be young, attractive women, but if they are not available, members should serve in turn" (quoted in Graham 119).

herself somewhat apart from conventional systems of apprenticeship and literary dissemination carried out in the *bundan* literary establishment of the various *waka* circles as well as that of the Kyōto literati scene in general. She took the suggestion of an old woman from Awata (粟田), who suggested that she try her hand at making tea pottery instead in order to support herself.[17] This proved to be sage advice—following the introduction of *gyokuro* 玉露 tea in 1835, Kyōto became *the* center for *sencha* pottery production, and there was a marked increase in demand for tea utensils during Rengetsu's lifetime. Consequently, Rengetsu "learned Shigaraki-style pottery, taking the clay from the hills of Kagura, and having her pieces fired at local kilns."[18] Eventually she began to use pottery as a means of communicating and disseminating her *waka* poetry, and in this way her distinctive type of "poettery" emerged. Graham points out that "Rengetsu's manner of joining poetry with pottery exerted direct influence on potters from Shigaraki, whom she came to know personally (Cort 1979, 243-245). The mass-produced *sencha* products of provincial kilns such as Shigaraki, however, remained destined for use among those who could not afford the higher-priced *sencha* wares of Kyōto's elite studio potters.'[19] Thus, for the most part, the audience and buyers of these affordable Rengetsu pieces were not always the same as the readership of the elite Kyōto *sencha* literati world.[20]

"Rengetsu-yaki," as it was called, was an unusual novelty, and quickly gained immense popularity. Its unique blend of pottery, poetry, and calligraphy was something entirely new for its time. Even the multi-talented Hon'ami Kōetsu who had been a master of two of those three arts never combined them in quite the same way that Rengetsu did. To be sure, there were potter-painters who brushed words in ink on the outer surfaces of earthenware, but rarely were these inscribed using a needle-like implement with *waka* poems in Japanese *kana* script – usually such writings indicated dates, places, or locations of where pot was made, or the occasion on which pottery was given, etc. If they were poems at all, they were usually verses in Chinese (*kanshi* 漢詩) rather than Japanese *waka*

[17] Tokuda, p. 54.
[18] Stevens, p. 89.
[19] Graham, p. 144.
[20] There is very little statistical and/or demographic information available to document the make-up of the audience of Rengetsu's poettery. Existing criticism has often been author-centric, emphasizing biographical facts about the artist/author at the cost of rendering the consumer, the reader, the audience, and sometimes even the materiality of the object itself, invisible. A post-Barthesian critique could be mobilized here to investigate a more embodied, reader-centric approach.

poetry.[21] Scholars of the history of Japanese pottery acknowledge that the technique of engraving calligraphic *waka* poetry into the clay of the pottery had never been seen before in the world of Kyōto ceramics until Rengetsu-ni invented and introduced it.[22]

Her poettery constituted a strategic synthesis of medium and message—she would typically carve her poetry in calligraphic script onto the surfaces of her rough-hewn, pre-fired pottery as it was still in the process of air-drying, but at times she would also brush the poems on, using an iron oxide pigment.[23] Her calligraphy is striking in its delicacy of line, and its aura of circular warmth mimicks the rounded shape of her teawares. The script and shape of a pot harmonize together to embody *maroyakasa* 円やかさ, or "roundedness in taste," which characterizes the ideal experience of drinking tea according to *sencha* aesthetics. Even those, like Aiba, who are critical of her skill in the other arts (i.e. poetry, painting, and pottery) when taken in isolation, rate her calligraphy quite highly.[24] Similarly, John Stevens praises Rengetsu's hand:

> Such command of brush and ink as we see here can only be attained by one who possesses a composed mind, a powerful grip, and intent concentration. It is evident from the subtle link between each of the characters that Rengetsu had mastered the martial art technique of *zanshin*: a continuous focus on the flow of energy between oneself and the target, or, as in this case, between the calligrapher and her brush, ink, and paper. The *bokki*, the spiritual force projected into the ink, is still,

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[21] Scholars such as Graham have placed Rengetsu within a male-dominated Sino-centric literati tradition, but in light of her preference for inscribing *kana* poems into pottery instead of *kanshi*, we must wonder about her position vis-à-vis the classical tradition of women's writing. Where does she fall within the traditionally gendered split between *onnade* women's writing (i.e. writing in Japanese *kana*) and *otokomoji* men's writing (writings in classical Chinese), or within gendered Edo-period *Kokugaku* categorizations of *taoyameburi* vs. *masuraoburi*? Do we read her poettery as gendered and/or nationalized in any way? Ongoing debates outlined by Sugimoto on the validity of Rengetsu's reputation as a virtuous emperor-respecting woman (*jojōfu*) highlight the extent to which these questions haunt our current understanding of the nun's work.

[22] Keiko Oka, "Rengetsu yaki," *Nihon tōki daijiten*, Ed. Yoshiaki Yabu. (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 2002), p. 199.

[23] Ibid., 199.

[24] Aiba Shōfū, "Ōtagaki Rengetsu," *Teishin to Chiyo to Rengetsu* (Tokyo: Shunshūsha ,1930).

> deep, and sharp. Although the brushwork is bold and crisp, it is unmistakably feminine, warm and reassuring.[25]

As is the case with Aiba, in Stevens' comment we see a tendency to appraise each category of artistic production separately—Stevens prioritizes the materiality of brush calligraphy (e.g. brush, ink, paper) over Rengetsu's engraved script on pottery (involving quite different tools of bamboo needles and clay) when assessing the level of calligraphic skill. In any case, Rengetsu's calligraphy is notably consistent, evincing great control of line: the handwriting on her pottery differs surprisingly little from her ink-on-paper brushwork. Horton surmises, "Her mature calligraphic style... probably evolved from incising characters on a clay ground. To avoid creating a messy surface and an unreadable text, she abandoned complicated fluctuations in brushwork in favor of a refreshing simplicity of line, generous in spirit and easy to read."[26] This is an art that is entirely humble, down-to-earth and unpretentious. "The aesthetic qualities of the bowl are well-suited to Japanese "tea-taste," which appreciated simplicity, irregularity, and a becoming awkwardness, or amateurishness, in utensils used to make and drink tea. These rustic qualities, together with the elegance of Rengetsu's calligraphy and the cultivation of her poetry, made such bowls valued and popular objects among the Kyōto literati,"[27] as well as among the common village folk of Niigata.[28]

Incredibly prolific, Rengetsu produced nearly 50,000 works (including *tanzaku* poem cards, sake cups and bottles, plates, paintings, incense containers, flower vases, tea bowls, and *chanoyu* water containers), and many of these were ceramics that remained very affordable within her lifetime to ordinary people.[29] According to the *Nihon Tōki Daijiten*, approximately 800 of her poems are extant.[30] This means that she

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[25] John Stevens, "Lotus Moon—The Art of the Buddhist Nun Rengetsu," *Arts of Asia* (Hong Kong) 17, No. 5 (1987): 90. It is interesting that Stevens feels compelled to describe her calligraphy in masculine, martial terms, even while categorizing her writing as stereotypically feminine. Though I can not provide a full-treatment of this subject here, there certainly seems to be a lot at stake in affixing Rengetsu's artistic identity in terms of gender and sexuality, as I have pointed out previously in footnote 17.

[26] Horton, p. 23.

[27] Maggie Bickford, "Department of Asian and Ethnographic Art," *Rhode Island School of Design Museum Notes*, Vol. 75, Oct. 1988: 13.

[28] Aiba, p. 5.

[29] Stevens, p. 90.

[30] Oka, p. 199.

sometimes inscribed the same poem on multiple ceramic pieces and media—in other words, there is not always a unique one-to-one correlation between a *waka* and a given type of object.

This does not mean, however, that the materiality of the text does not matter for our understanding and experience of a given Rengetsu poem. What it does indicate is that she did not consider her work as "high art" in the way that a present-day high Modernist might – she had, of course, eschewed the elite world of professional poetry in favor of this more accessible and pragmatic means of aesthetic production. When it came to her pottery-making, artistic individuality and authenticity were simply not crucial issues for her. In keeping with the master-apprentice production dynamics of many East Asian arts and crafts (or, for that matter, guild or atelier systems of European Medieval and Renaissance painting), in her old age, Rengetsu had apprentices shape much of the pottery for her. In some cases apprentices would sign the finished pieces in her name, again a common practice within traditional modes of Japanese artistic production.

Even during her lifetime, counterfeit "Rengetsu-yaki" existed – Aiba indicates that Rengetsu herself condoned the existence of "fake" copies of her ceramic work. Tokuda claims that there were five or six counterfeiters at work during Rengetsu's lifetime, and that though some were able to make convincing copies of her ceramics, none could reproduce her distinctive calligraphic style of incision.[31] According to one anecdote, one of these forgers gave up trying to copy her script, and in frustration, approached Rengetsu and asked her to inscribe her poems onto the counterfeit pots for him.[32] Apparently the nun was happy to oblige, and even went so far as to urge him not to hesitate to bring more of his fake pots so she can engrave her writings onto those as well.

This easy-going attitude towards authenticity in pottery did not carry over in the same way, however, in her attitudes towards the publication of poetry. In particular, the nun claimed that some of the works in the Rengetsu anthology, *Ama no Karumo* (海人の刈る藻), compiled by the Kokugaku scholar Kondō Yoshiki 近藤芳樹 (1801-1880) and published in 1870, were not actually written by her. In fact, she never authorized the book, and did not even bother to look over or to edit the manuscript.[33] Though the very fact that she did not even bother to work on the anthology seems to fit in to her general lax attitude towards the authenticity of her ceramic productions, there is something different in the seriousness of her

[31] Tokuda, p. 58.
[32] Ibid., p. 59.
[33] Nagasawa Meitsū, ed. "Ama no Karumo," *Jonin waka taikei: Shikashūki edo*, Vol. 3 (Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1968), p. 498.

reaction to "counterfeit poems" in comparison to her response to counterfeit pottery. What accounts for Rengetsu's more critical attitude towards others' appropriation of her poetry compositions as opposed to her pottery-making? Doesn't this difference trouble our earlier assertion that poetry and pottery are components of one and the same thing, namely, poettery? How do we resolve this difficulty?

In considering the case of Rengetsu's skeptical, disengaged stance towards *Ama no Karumo*, one must keep in mind that that collection was a *mass print publication*, as opposed to a manuscript of hand-written (i.e. calligraphied) poems. As historian Roger Chartier has argued, one characteristic aspect of print publication is that it has a tendency to de-materialize manuscript texts so as to render its material modes of production invisible. By reproducing the manuscript into a standardized, often depersonalized format, print publication generally divorces poems from the distinct calligraphic hand in which they were written for example, and severs the lyric from the material medium onto which it was written or incised. In considering texts like Rengetsu's metageneric, multi-media poettery, this de-materialization is no trivial matter. The medium and the message can not be separated without doing damage to both.

In light of this, I would like to suggest here that the reason why Rengetsu reacted so negatively to the *Ama no Karumo* book lay not only in the fact that "inauthentic" poems were smuggled in under her name (i.e. their origins and material bases are not accounted for), but more significantly in the way that publication disembodied her poetry, effectively amputating the poems from their material contexts. This would help to explain why Rengetsu strongly resisted various other opportunities for her *waka* to appear in printed, published book format.[34] At least in the case of counterfeit pottery, the fraudulent copy would leave intact the very amalgam of poetry, calligraphy, and pottery, of medium and message, which Rengetsu had taken such pains to bring together in the first place. In contrast, *Ama no Karumo* does not even specify which poems in the collection had been lifted from pottery, and which had been written down with ink on paper on tanzaku, etc.. This material context, background and medium is extremely important in the work of Rengetsu, and is too often overlooked in the literary criticism and documentation of her corpus. By looking closely at Rengetsu-yaki, it is clear that the inscribed poem has been carefully chosen to match the shape, color, size, pattern, function, and occasion of the particular pottery object itself (whether made by her hand or not) and vice versa.

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[34] See Tokuda, pp. 188-189.

For example, one *kensui* water bowl[35] dating from Rengetsu's seventy-fifth year has a Bashō-esque[36] poem engraved on the outside, and a small ceramic frog lodged in the shadows at the bottom curve within the container. The frog is not visible to the reader whose eyes are pre-occupied with tracing the script on the outer perimeters of the bowl. This is significant, for the *tanka* itself plays with the dynamic of seeing and not seeing by punning on the word for water, *mizu*, which can also be interpreted as "to not see". Moreover, the poem plays on the folk belief that frogs crying at dusk induce drowsiness because the amphibians are letting us know that they will "borrow our eyes" for the night while we sleep.[37] The shape, construction, and function of the poetteric object inform our understanding of the *waka* and vice versa. This kind of metageneric, multimedia work highlights the specific, materially embodied processes of reading, whether these be oral/aural readings and/or visual readings of scripted words.

Clearly, the experience of reading a poem inscribed on the outside of a bowl as you drink warm tea from it is entirely different from reading a poem on a flat white printed page, laid out in a row along with scores of other poems in the same script like anonymous tombstones in a snow-covered cemetery. In our readings, we must be sensitive to the fact that the material qualities of the clay object enhance the meaning and significance of each poem. Put simply, materiality matters, and this is why Rengetsu insisted on preserving the semiotic, as well as the symbolic meanings of her poems. Furthermore, focusing on the experiential materiality of the text has the added advantage of allowing us to read beyond the usual writer-centric, "cult of the author" approaches that have characterized much of the scholarship on Rengetsu to date. Here it will be useful to recall Hayles' definition of "materiality" and how it can help us to nuance the "death of the author" issue in our interpretation of literary texts. She argues that materiality is something more than just

> the physical, tangible aspects of the construction, delivery and reading apparatus. [It] is a selective focus on certain physical

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[35] An implement used in both *sencha* and *chanoyu* gatherings to collect dirty water that has been used to clean tea-drinking bowls.

[36] Naturally, Rengetsu's poem is a *tanka* alluding to the shorter *haiku* by Bashō: *furuike ya/ kawazu tobikomu/ mizu no oto.* The deployment of such an allusion is yet another way in which Rengetsu transgresses categories of genre, in this case literary genre. Rengetsu's waka reads as follows: *mizu nuramu ike no kahatsu (kawazu) no kikikoe wa yakate (yagate) nemuri so (zo) moyofu (moyou) sarekeru.*

[37] This sleep-inducing hour in the evening is known as "kawazu no megari doki," the time when frogs borrow human eyes.

> aspects of an instantiated text that are foregrounded by a work's construction, operation, and content. These properties cannot be determined in advance of the work by the critic or even the writer. Rather, they emerge from the interplay between the apparatus, the work, the writer and the reader/user.[38]

Taking materiality into account allows us to consider not only the authorial and biographical contexts, but also the ways in which literary meanings arise in the interaction between the text-object and the reader.

We might wonder, for example, what sorts of self-reflexive musings might be triggered when one pours a drink from a sake bottle inscribed with a poem that simultaneously encourages the reader/drinker to enjoy alcohol and warns him or her against excessive drunkenness. In this case, there is a clearly intertwined relation between the content of the words and the container on which they are written. The following poem tattooes the rough, outer surface of a sake-container or *tokkuri*, which was apparently made entirely by Rengetsu's own hand:[39]

> 味酒のみわの過ぎずばこれぞこの不老不死のくすりならまし
>
> *umazake no miwa no sugizu ba kore zo kono furō fushi no kusuri naramashi*
>
> Enjoy delicious sake
> Without overdoing it
> And it becomes
> An elixir that cures
> Old age and death.[40]

Every line of the *tokkuri* itself (including the mouth) is clumsy, deliberately misshapen and unsteady, as if in comic mimicry of the state of inebriation. A clever pivot word in the beginning of the poem which puns on the word to drink (飲み) and the word "miwa (神酒)" meaning both "large sake jug" and "an offering of wine or a libation for the gods," exemplifies how the meanings of this "poettery" often spill outside of

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[38] N. Katherine Hayles, "Materiality Has Always Been in Play," by Lisa Gitelman, *The Iowa Review (Web)* 20 May 2003: 2.
[39] Stevens, pp. 94-95.
[40] Ibid., p. 95.

established borders of poetic line breaks, and cannot be so neatly contained.

There is a curious tension in the discourse surrounding Rengetsu's work, and for those of us readers who are surrounded by a Western academic tradition after Plato, this tension is directly related to the question of materiality: how do we reconcile the specter of materialism (i.e. as commercialism, not in the philosophical sense) with the impulse towards spirituality latent in Rengetsu's work? Can we read Rengetsu as a case study demonstrating that the foregrounding of materiality does not necessarily lead to an unequivocal "selling out"? It is true that Rengetsu was not entirely comfortable with the wordly, commercial aspects of her life and her pottery enterprise – one poem in particular voices this anxiety about having to sell her work to earn a living. Though she reproduced this poem later in brush-on-paper format (accompanied by a painting of a tea pot), the earlier manifestations of this text are in the form of engravings on flower containers such as the *hechima* gourd-shaped hanging vase described by Sugimoto:[41]

> 土もて花瓶を作りて
> 手すさびのはかなきものを持ち出でてうるまの市にたつぞわびしき
>
> *Tsuchi mote kabin wo tsukurite*
> *Tesusabi no hakanaki mono wo mochi idete uruma no ichi ni tatsu zo wabishiki*
>
> Digging Clay and Making a Vase
>
> Taking the fragile
> little handmade
> Thing to sell –
> How lonely it looks
> in the market place![42]

And here is an alternate translation by Howard Levy:

> Building a dirt flowerpot.
>
> Amusing

[41] Sugimoto, pp. 101-103.
[42] Stevens, p. 111.

myself
with
my hands
I
bring forth this
hapless thing
and
at
Uruma Market
lonely it stands.[43]

In the original Japanese, the pun on the place name of Uruma meaning, "selling space" heightens the extent to which Rengetsu expresses sadness or gloom (wabishiki) at having to circulate her creations in a market exchange economy. The loneliness of the flower vase becomes a kind of objective correlative for the poet's own feelings of being out of place and alone in the atmosphere of the market. In this period of early modernity in Japan, in an emerging capitalist world of fetishized commodities wherein material objects become alienated and dissociated from the contexts of their creation and even their use, Rengetsu attempted to counter-act this separation of object and meaning by asserting the connection between her own human experience and the material things she created. This was clearly an important text for her in terms of the way she perceived her own life and work, as it was one of the seven poems she included in a brief autobiographical testament she presented to Tomioka Tessai towards the end of her life.[44]

Though her poettery-making in some ways may seem to be a very practical, samsaric exercise that merely allowed her to make a living in the world, upon closer investigation it becomes clear that there is more going on here than commercial concerns.[45] This poetteric practice itself was steeped in religious, Buddhist elements, particularly meditation. Rengetsu often made teapots in the shape of lotus, thus merging the Zen aspects of

[43] Levy, p. 49.
[44] Sugimoto, p. 94.
[45] Tokuda notes that Rengetsu never desired to earn more money than was absolutely necessary to sustain herself. He recounts one anecdote where a customer paid her a generous amount of money for one piece of poettery. Shocked at the large amount he left behind and embarrassed that she did not have enough pieces to offer him to equal the payment, Rengetsu frantically sat down to work and produced the exact number of pieces that that payment would have normally bought, and rushed them off forthwith to the customer. See Tokuda, p. 207.

the tea ceremony with her own Buddhist signature while simultaneously alluding to the all-important Lotus Sutra.[46] Here we get a glimpse of how the very embedded materiality of her poettery itself engages in a Buddhist dialectic between the wordly and the soteriological, in much the same way that the Lotus Sutra mediates between the path to enlightenment and its physical manifestations. Stevens writes, "the time-consuming work of pottery making would perhaps assuage the pain in her heart as a kind of 'moving meditation.'" [47] Though this assessment sounds rather melodramatic in its assumption of an "expressive" model of artistic production, there is ample textual evidence to support the religious interpretation implied in Stevens's conjecture. Take, for example, yet another self-reflexively metageneric poem, which has been translated by Howard Levy with the title, "Stating feelings."

> あけたては埴もてあそひくれゆけは仏をろかみおもふことなし[48]
>
> Aketateba hani mote asobi kureyukeba hotoke orokami omou koto nashi
>
> When dawn comes
> I
> but play with clay,
> make Buddhas
> out of folded paper,
> without
> a thought in mind.[49]

John Stevens has translated the poem above quite differently, titling it "Working in the North Mountains:"[50]:

> From dawn to dusk,
> Spending the day
> Gathering clay:
> Surely Buddha would not

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[46] Stevens, p. 94.
[47] Stevens, p. 89.
[48] Along with the aforementioned "Tesusabi" poem, this *waka* is one of the seven poems Rengetsu included in her autobiographical sketch (Sugimoto 95). Rengetsu introduces this poem in the following manner: "Now at the end of my life, I am over 80 years old..."
[49] Levy, p. 95.
[50] Stevens, p. 102.

Think this a trifling matter.

The difference in translations may be due to the ambiguous orthography of classical Japanese *kana* writing (をろがみ or をろかみ) – orthography itself is a rather recent product of standardized print conventions. Even in the process of translation, we are forced to confront the ways in which print publication distorts or changes the meanings of the original work.

Levy's translation above captures Rengetsu's pun on the words "*hani*" (clay) and "*ha ni*" (葉に "on/with leaves of paper"), and the translator interprets the latter as a *jo* or introduction to an alternative meaning of *orogami* ("to worship") as similar to "*origami*." However, this interpretation of "*orogami*" does not make much sense both in the context of classical Japanese verb conjugations for the word "to fold" (折り) and in the context of Rengetsu's life and practice. There is no record of Rengetsu folding origami Buddhas out of paper, much less that she engaged in such an activity all day long from dawn to dusk. It is much more likely that the sense of the pun on "ha" (葉) as *feuilles de papier* here refers to her practice of writing poetry and calligraphy. In fact, the word "ha" has traditionally signified poetry, as in the title of the poetry collection, the *Man'yōshū*, (万葉集) or "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves (i.e. Poems)," an anthology which Rengetsu frequently drew from through the use of *honkadori* and *makurakotoba*. Once again, we see how the very material art of pottery is inseparable from Rengetsu's poetic practice. Moreover, Rengetsu's choice of the verb もてあそぶ , "to play", has a very material, tangible connotation meaning "to hold and play with something with one's hands." Therefore, even her poetry-writing has a very tactile, material aspect to it. (In this light, it is useful to recall that the practice of calligraphy and the copying/writing of texts was called "tenarai," or "learning by hand"). By connecting poetry and pottery to her Buddhist practice, Rengetsu performatively fulfills the Lotus Sutra's injunction of realizing no-mind spirituality (e.g. おもふことなし) in the shape of her art of embedded materiality. Her life's work is everywhere infused with the task of bringing together and re-synthesizing religious ideals with a tangible, physical embodiment, which are continually being pushed towards opposite dipodes in the process of modernization.

Rengetsu's work demonstrates an attempt to integrate religious practice with the bare practicality of making enough money to stay alive. I bring this up not to impose some Western Platonic or Neo-Cartesian dichotomy between the spiritual mind and the material body onto a putatively pure and untouched Asian-Buddhist *Weltanshauung*, but rather

as a reminder that by Rengetsu's lifetime, there was already a robust mercantile economy in place in the major metropolises in Japan, including Rengetsu's hometown of Kyōto. And, as the critic Peter Stallybrass notes, "with capitalism, the spiritual and the economic go in antithetical directions...for the spirit of the commodity, as Marx so cogently argued, is "supra-sensible;" in so far as an object becomes a commodity, "all its sensuous characteristics are extinguished[51]." Rengetsu, who continued to work through Japan's early modernization and Westernization process, was an artist caught in this increasing bifurcation between spirit and matter (or rather, between "the pure invisible text" and its "material trappings"). Her *oeuvre* clearly tries to sustain a more immediate, multimedia relationship between the "suprasensible" Buddhistic aspects of the text and their very sensible material groundings which all too often become denigrated and devalued at the cost of the suprasensible.

In conclusion, it is clear that in order to attain a more balanced understanding of Rengetsu's art, we must first be attentive to the ways in which the "earthly" and the "transcendental", the textual and the contextual work together to create meaning. We can only truly appreciate Rengetsu's poettery if we avoid the temptation to separate the container from what is contained within and without. Reading multimedia, metageneric, material such as the work of Rengetsu-ni requires a multidisciplinary, media-specific approach that is engages with the materiality (as well as the materialism) of the text. As literary critics operating in a late-capitalist, post-neo-Kantian academic context, we must reverse engineer and historicize our own disciplinary and aesthetic categories and assumptions about the value and meaning of a work of art or a literary text in order to get a fuller grasp of what is at stake in the task of interpreting Rengetsu. The radicality of her work lies very much in the ways in which it challenges us to become meta-generic readers of embodied texts – it compels us to re-examine and rethink the relationships between the literary and the extra-linguistic, the work of art and the commodity, pottery and poetry, materiality and meaning.

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[51] Peter Stallybrass, "The Value of Culture and the Disavowal of Things, " *Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar* No. 1 (2000). Last downloaded 29 February 2004 from http://eserver.org/emc/1-1/stallybrass.html.

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