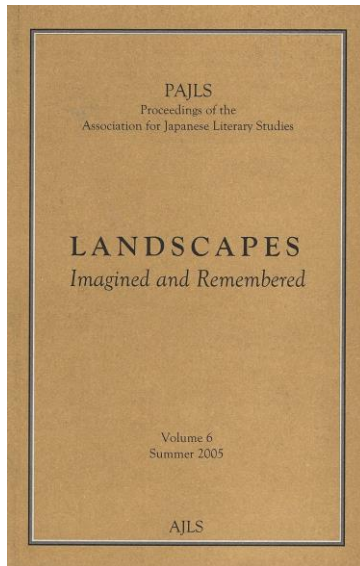


“*Henge buyō* in the Asakeno Episode of Kyokutei Bakin’s *Hakkenden*”

James Reichert 

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 6 (2005): 123–128.



PAJLS 6:
Landscapes: Imagined and Remembered.
Ed. Paul S. Atkins, Davinder L. Bhowmik, and Edward Mack.

Henge buyō in the Asakeno Episode of Kyokutei Bakin's *Hakkenden*

Jim Reichert

Stanford University

Kyokutei Bakin's *Hakkenden* (Tale of Eight Dogs, 1814-42) stands as one of the monumental literary achievements of the nineteenth century, noteworthy for its massive scale and its skillful appropriation of tropes from a wide variety of genres, including folktales, ethical treatises, histories, and the canons of classical Japanese and Chinese prose and poetry. In this paper, I suggest the existence of other sites of inspiration for the tale by demonstrating how the text appropriates and modifies modes of representation from the contemporaneous kabuki theater. Arguing for a connection between *Hakkenden* and kabuki is an unusual step, since it is an article of faith among Bakin scholars that the writer disdained kabuki as vulgar entertainment and tried to avoid contaminating his didactic narratives with such a plebeian form. One goal of this paper, therefore, is to explore how the so-called decadent elements associated with nineteenth-century kabuki, such as overt gender play, aestheticization of violence, and excessive sexuality, operated in relation to the more moralistic components of Bakin's tale.

I will look at one episode in *Hakkenden*, the vendetta murder of Makuwari Daiki by the dog knight Inuzaka Keno, in which the incorporation of kabuki elements is especially conspicuous. I argue that in this section the text adapts theatrical signifying mechanisms, specifically the *hayagawari* (quick change) and the *henge buyō* (transformation dance), to present the reader with a spectacular "on stage" mutation in which a seductive and violent femme fatale transmogrifies into a stolid symbol of Confucian rectitude. The overt manner in which this transformation is presented underscores the difference between the decadent and the moral, as it simultaneously establishes their inter-connectedness by demonstrating that a single character can embody both of these principles. In short, it treats these principles as two sides of the same coin.

Before I discuss the textual enactment of *hayagawari* and *henge buyō* in the Keno episode, let me provide some information about these techniques. *Hayagawari* is an on-stage costume change that sometimes involves an actor switching from one character to another or casting off a disguise to reveal his true identity. *Henge buyō* is a genre of dance performance in which the technique of *hayagawari* plays a central role: in *henge buyō* the performer transforms from one identity to another (often multiple times) during the course of the dance. On many occasions, *henge buyō* involves shifts that cross gender borders. Examples of both traditions can be found in early kabuki, but

they reached their peaks in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, Suwa Haruo, an authority on Edo theater, suggests that on-stage transformation was the defining feature of mid-nineteenth century kabuki.¹

In this paper, I will consider how this principle of overt, “on-stage” transformation manifests itself in the Keno episode of *Hakkenden*. This episode appears in Part Six of the work, which was published in 1827, thirteen years after the publication of Part One. It comes approximately one-third of the way through the tale. The episode introduces Inuzaka Keno, the dog knight who represents the Confucian virtue of wisdom. It chronicles Keno’s successful effort to carry out the vendetta murder of Makuwari Daiki, a powerful retainer of the Chiba clan. Justifying Keno’s murder of Makuwari was the fact that the rapacious retainer, exploiting the loose reins of the Chiba leadership, had wrongly accused Keno’s father, Aiwara Tanenori, of stealing a precious heirloom from their lord. Makuwari then used this crime as an excuse to wipe out Tanenori and his family. Keno only escaped because Makuwari was unaware that Keno’s mother, a minor concubine of Tanenori, was pregnant.

The moral significance of Keno’s vendetta is concisely summarized in a Chinese poem that Keno writes in Makuwari’s blood on a pillar in the tower: “I have killed everyone here to avenge my father and brother. I have also disposed of a corrupt retainer for my lord. If a lord wields his power as he should, then we would never see the political unrest that befell Xuge.”² The first part of the statement is clear. Keno has fulfilled his moral obligation as a warrior to avenge his family and punish by his own hand the perpetrator of the crime. He also uses the poem to declare the murder an expression of loyalty to the Chiba clan, since he has disposed of a wicked, unfaithful retainer for his lord. The last phrase, however, is slightly more complicated. Alluding to an episode recorded in the fourth-century BC Chinese history *Zuozhuan* (The Tso Documentary), Keno refers to Xuge, an ancient city-state in which a weak ruler was overthrown, resulting in political chaos for the entire region. With this reference, Keno lays much of the blame for Makuwari’s immoral behavior on the weakness of the leaders of the Chiba clan, who were incapable of exerting authority over a wayward retainer. And herein lies one, although certainly not the only, important ethical theme of *Hakkenden*: the idea that authority and power should be earned through moral behavior, strong leadership, and effective governance. Although the text does not question the value of social hierarchy, it argues that maintaining the status quo is not, in and of itself, a legitimate argument for supporting an existing political or social order.

Typically, when literary historians discuss this episode they emphasize the parallels with an equally famous chapter from the fourteenth-century

¹ Suwa Haruo, *Edokko no bigaku* (Tokyo: Nihon Shoseki Kabushikigisha, 1980), 131-35.

² Kyokutei Bakin, *Nansō Satomi hakkenden*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1985), 327.

Chinese classic *Shui hu zhuan* (Outlaws of the Marsh), a popular tale that justifies civil disobedience in the face of an illegitimate or unjust political order. The specific scene cited as a source for the Keno episode is one in which the strongman Wu Song breaks into the house of a corrupt government official, General Zhang. It is one of the bloodier scenes in *Shui hu zhuan*, with Wu Song killing not only General Zhang, but also his henchmen, servants, and even his small children.³ A similar bloody dynamic defines the *Hakkenden* scene, in which the melee ends with a pile of corpses, including Makuwari, his guards, his servants, his wife, and his children. It is not surprising that scholars would focus on the similarities to the scene from *Shui hu zhuan*, since the introduction to Part One of *Hakkenden* explicitly declares the beloved Chinese tale to be one of the three main source texts on which Bakin bases his narrative.

There are, however, important differences between the Keno episode of *Hakkenden* and the Wu Song episode of *Shui hu zhuan*. The most obvious difference is the gender identification of the two characters. Wu Song is one of the more conventionally masculine of the 108 outlaw heroes in the Chinese tale. His most famous act is killing a tiger with his bare hands. He is renowned for his physical prowess, his immense body, his rough manners, and his excessive appetite for food and drink. In stark contrast, Keno makes his first appearance in *Hakkenden* as a woman, a dancing girl named Asakeno. Eventually, Keno accounts for this gender-bending masquerade by explaining that after the murder of his father, he was taken into hiding by his mother. Reasoning that the best way to protect her son was to conceal his identity, she decided that the most effective disguise was one that involved a gender switch. Thereafter, Keno was reared as a girl and eventually joined a dancing troupe, making a name for him/herself as a performer. It is in this guise that s/he first appears in the narrative. Significantly, the text does not reveal Keno's true identity or anatomical sex when it introduces the character. To the contrary, the text simply treats the character as a woman, referring to Asakeno as *onna*, commenting on her ample "feminine" charms (supple waist, delicate complexion, sexy aura), her beautiful clothes, and her seductive dance performance.

This reliance on the gender-masquerade device suggests the relevance of other cultural narratives in shaping the Keno episode. In particular, the episode closely parallels a scene from the Tsuruya Nanboku play *Sanga no shō Soga no shimadai* (The Estate of Sanga—A Decorative Island Centerpiece of the Soga Clan), which was first performed, to great commercial success, in 1821, just a few years before Bakin composed Chapters 56 and 57 of *Hakkenden*. The play recounts the travails of a Sasano Gonza, a minor retainer of the Chiba clan who is wrongly accused of stealing an heirloom from his

³ Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong, *Shui hu zhuan*, vol. 1., trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1983), 476-89.

lord. Trying to lie low while he figures out how to recover the heirloom and restore his reputation, Gonza disguises himself as a female prostitute. Rapidly rising to the top of the courtesan hierarchy, he encounters the thief of the heirloom. In a fit of rage, he slaughters half a dozen people in the brothel (although he lets the main culprit slip through his hands.) At the conclusion of this melee, the Gonza character performs an on-stage *hayagawari* and returns to his true identity.⁴

Of course, it is impossible to determine whether or not Bakin consciously patterned the episode in *Hakkenden* after the scene from Nanboku's play. But the Keno episode certainly exhibits a comparable fascination with gender ambiguity, sexualized violence, and sadistic cruelty. There is, for instance, a provocative scene in which Asakeno encounters one of her dog knight brothers, Inuta Kobungo. Rather than reveal her identity, Asakeno declares her love for Kobungo and begs the more mature warrior to become her lover. Significantly, Asakeno attempts this seduction at precisely the moment when she first reveals her capacity for violence. It is right after she dispatches her first victim with a hairpin through the neck that she makes this sexual overture. This conflation of sex, violence, and gender ambiguity in the person of Asakeno reaches a crescendo when she concludes her rampage and appears before the stunned Kobungo, "her luxuriant black locks a tousled mess, her fine silk robes, torn and spattered with blood; in her right hand glistened a cruel, icy dagger . . . from her left hand dangled the severed head of Makuwari."⁵ Immediately after this descriptive passage, Keno reveals his masquerade and declares his true identity and gender. With that revelation, he morphs into a more conventional masculine identity – the stolid defender of Confucian morality.

I would argue that although the transformation of Asakeno into Keno relies on the same technique of *hayagawari* that we see in the Nanboku play, the nature of mutation is more profound. Despite the parallel scenarios of a young man casting off a feminine costume, in the case of Gonza, the audience knows from the outset that the young man is merely masquerading as a woman, whereas in *Hakkenden* the transformation comes as a complete surprise, which produces the effect of a more complete, or total, metamorphosis. I would suggest, therefore, that the sudden and spectacular transition of Asakeno to Keno constitutes something closer in spirit to the principle of *henge*, or the transformation from one distinct identity to another. Moreover, because the transition is enacted so conspicuously – it is the undeniable climax of the episode – it offers readers the same provocative, highly theatrical performance of continuity within discontinuity that is the hallmark of *henge buyō*.

⁴ Tsuruya Nanboku, *Sanga no shō Soga no shimadai*, in *Tsuruya Nanboku zenshū*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1972), 100-103.

⁵ *Hakkenden*, vol. 3, 320.

This *henge*-like transition is enacted visually in Keisai Eisen's frontispiece, one of the key signifying mechanisms of the episode. The composition is distinctive among the frontispiece illustrations for the tale, in that an audience, consisting of the minor characters from the episode, surrounds the two main characters. The image thus reproduces visually the space of a stage. Further underscoring the theatricality of the image is the representation of Asakeno anachronistically attired in the garb of a nineteenth-century kabuki performer.

Eisen's illustration offers readers a vision of the two incarnations of the Asakeno/Keno character. As the eye travels from one figure to the other, the viewer experiences something akin to the on-stage transformation piece. In this manner, the image visually reproduces the effect of continuity within discontinuity embodied by *henge buyō*. The discontinuity is clearly signified by the stark difference between figures of Keno and Asakeno. Aside from obvious differences in costume, the two figures have distinct physiognomies: the brow, eyes, nose, mouth, and chin are radically dissimilar. Indeed, as was probably intended, a first-time reader of the text would no doubt assume that the composition depicted two different characters: the as-yet-to-be-introduced dog knight Keno and a female character, perhaps a sister, sharing some kind of still undetermined link with him. It is only upon reading the subsequent narrative that the reader learns the relationship between the two figures and can appreciate that this illustration does not represent two figures occupying the same time and space, but rather a variation on the visual technique, favored by Edo book illustrators, of showing the same figure at two different points in time in the same illustration. The connection between the two is subtly hinted at through the various visual clues, including the important fact that Keno's magical bead, the source of his power and the emblem that identifies him as one of the dog knights, seems to emanate from Asakeno's wave-boa, which enters into the bottom left-hand corner of Keno's frame.

Recognition of the *henge buyō*-like effect in the Asakeno-Keno episode illuminates a larger textual strategy for linking the various seemingly unrelated and contradictory elements that constitute the text of *Hakkenden*. Specifically, it reveals a practice that allows the text to signify meaning on multiple levels. Or to put it more simply, it emerges as one component of a larger system that enables the text to fulfill its dual functions of racy entertainment and moral edification in a manner that simultaneously links these two operations and plays upon the tension between them. For example, in the sudden transformation of Asakeno into Keno, we see not the stark opposition of good versus evil that is typically attributed to Bakin's tales, but rather, a more sophisticated textual sleight-of-hand that transforms an eroticized, violent, and undeniably frightening figure into an upstanding paragon of virtue in a manner that prevents a simple separation of these two entities. Even when Keno reveals his "true" identity as distinct from his

“impersonation” of Asakeno, the remnants of his former identity cling to the character. In other words, even after he becomes a conventional hero and a defender of righteous morality, Keno is still connected to his earlier, more sensational, and, judging from print series and kabuki dramatizations that followed the publication of *Hakkenden*, far more memorable persona of Asakeno.

This, in turn, complicates the significance of Asakeno/Keno’s murder of Makuwari. On the one hand, the vendetta is justified through various moral systems: the personal code of honor of a warrior, the feudal obligation of a vassal to his lord, and the larger duty of a man of honor to reform an unjust or flawed political order. Disturbing, but certainly not nullifying, these ethical justifications is the sensational mix of sex, gender ambiguity, and chaotic violence that defines the representation of the murder itself. In a kind of metaphorical *henge buyō*, the text suddenly shifts gears between these two modes, offering a new frame of reference for interpreting the events of the episode. This new moral frame, however, does not succeed in erasing the horror and exhilaration excited by the spectacle of Asakeno’s rampage. Rather, the traces of this earlier mode of representation continue to resonate, insuring that Keno’s identity and actions exceed the confining limits associated with his ostensible function in the tale as a paragon of the Confucian virtue of wisdom. What we see in this episode, then, is the operation of a signifying device, one that resembles the more presentational tradition of kabuki. This device enables the text to inform the character Keno and the events that define his character with a multiplicity of meaning. It enriches the episode and its signification, incorporating into the rendition of a righteous act “decadent” features associated with more popular forms of entertainment. The net effect of this strategy, I would argue, is that it subtly reinforces the outlaw nature of Keno, and by extension the other dog knights, and adds a hint of the subversive to their heroic cause. The skillful manner in which the narrative accomplishes this helps to account for *Hakkenden*’s remarkable ability to appeal to a wide audience of both elite and common readers.