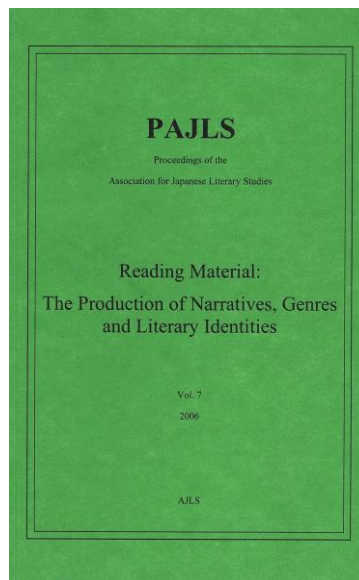


“The Expanding Role of the Carnavalesque and the
Early Meiji Fiction of Kanagaki Robun”

Kelly Hansen 

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 7 (2006): 61–69.



PAJLS 7:
*Reading Material: The Production of Narratives, Genres
and Literary Identities.*
Ed. James Dorsey and Dennis Washburn.

The Expanding Role of the Carnavalesque And the Early Meiji Fiction of Kanagaki Robun

Kelly Hansen

The University of Hawaii

I. Introduction

The literary career of Kanagaki Robun 仮名垣魯文 (1829-1894), known first as a writer of comic fiction and later as a newspaper editor and journalist, spanned the late Edo and early Meiji Periods. Often cited as one of the last successful writers of *gesaku* 戯作, his work has conventionally been classified as part of the tail end of a fading Edo tradition that managed to seep briefly into the early years of the Meiji period. While it is certainly true that his writing never lost the lighthearted, frivolous tone associated with *gesaku*, Robun was nothing if not topical, in both content and form, and proved himself highly adaptable to the transformations taking place in the print culture of early Meiji Japan. Technological changes in the printing industry,¹ as well as the rise of the newspaper industry, expanded both the volume and the readership of publications. Along with many other *gesaku* writers, Robun turned to the growing field of journalism for employment, a shift which would have a considerable impact on the narrative structure of his writing.

Needless to say, the shift from *gesaku* to journalism was hardly a natural one. Whereas *gesaku* strove above all else to amuse and entertain, the newspaper industry took authenticity and edification as its starting point. On September 3, 1871, the Meiji government issued a document entitled *Shibunshi jōrei* 新聞紙条例, or *Newspaper Regulations*, proclaiming the purpose of newspapers to be the “development of people’s knowledge.” The document went on to state that, “though care must be taken not to bore readers, it is forbidden to make a mountain out of a molehill, to turn falsehood into truth, to agitate men’s hearts or to deceive the public.”² While the *ōshinbun* 大新聞, or big newspapers, did generally strive for authenticity and edification, *koshinbun* 小新聞, or small newspapers, tended to see themselves first and foremost as

¹ The transition from woodblock printing to moveable type would make printing both faster and cheaper.

² A. A. Altman, “The Press and Social Cohesion During a Period of Change: The Case of Early Meiji Japan,” in *Routledge Library of Modern Japan, Meiji Japan: Economic and Social History 1868-1912 II*, ed. Peter Kornicki (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 220.

commercial enterprises, and continued to focus on entertainment as their key selling point.³ A witty tone, combined with embellishment and exaggeration were common in the writings of the *gesaku* journalists employed by these *koshinbun*.

As Robun moved into this hybrid genre that combined *gesaku* with journalism, the notion of place, which had always been infused with a sense of the carnival spirit in his work, took on a more expansive role. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) gives the following description of carnival:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal.⁴

In other words, carnival is a place where the officialdom of the state is absent, and pre-established norms are turned upside down. In many Edo period *gesaku* works, government restrictions against reporting or commenting on affairs of the state meant that only small, isolated spaces could serve as sites of carnival. However, by early Meiji, many of these restrictions had been lifted. Robun in particular capitalized on this journalistic freedom to create carnivalesque narrative of ever growing proportions. In other words, as the literary and journalistic landscape of early Meiji Japan expanded, so did the site of carnival in his writings. In *Aguranabe* 安愚楽鍋, or *Sitting Around the Beefpot*, published in 1871-2 shortly after the Meiji Restoration, the narrative is limited to a single enclosed space. However, just seven years later, when Robun published *Takahashi Oden yasha monogatari* 高橋お伝夜叉譚, or *The Tale of Takahashi Oden The She-Devil* (1879), the narrative spreads out across the entire country. A close examination of these two works will show not only how this notion of carnival expands, but also how it grows to play a defining role in the narrative structure of Robun's writing.

II. *Aguranabe*: Carnival in a Beefbowl Restaurant

Aguranabe was published as a woodblock text, serialized in pamphlet form. It is a collection of sketches consisting of short descriptions of customers, followed by brief conversational snippets. The sketches all take place within the confines of the restaurant and do not appear to be in any particular order. The fact that the sketches in *Aguranabe* consist primarily of transcribed monologues, or reproductions of oral communication, suggests that this work still has a strong connection to the oral tradition. Maeda Ai describes the status of texts during this transitional period as follows:

³ For example, one of the first *koshibun*, the *Yomiuri shinbun*, included an announcement in its first issue on November 3, 1874, stating that it would use a writing style close to the spoken language in order to be easily understood by all readers, particularly women and children. Unlike the focus on politics and economics found in the *ōshinbun*, the *koshinbun* tended to report mainly on local events or gossip. Especially in the earlier editions, articles often concluded with a moral comment for the reader to reflect on. See Okitsu Kaname, “‘Tsuzukimono no kenkyū,’” in *Meiji kaikaki bungakushū 2, Meiji bungaku zenshū*, ed. Shizuo Takenouchi (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1977), pp. 413-424.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Oswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10.

Literary historians concerned with readership have also observed that the age of silent reading was preceded by an era when the practice of reading aloud was gradually abandoned. Taking England, for example . . . a radically different literary expression conceived strictly as a printed medium (i.e. the prose narrative form of the novel) begins to appear only with the advent of journalism in the early eighteenth century . . . In Japan, this period of reading aloud can be thought of as coinciding with the era of woodblock printing, which preceded the import of movable type print. The early years of Meiji, when woodblock printing was giving way to movable type print, also witnessed the final stages in the transition from what Riesman calls oral communication [*kōwa*] to the written word. This was still an age when the printed word had not quite realized its function as an independent medium in its own right, and was seen partly as a means of presenting or reproducing oral communication.⁵

In other words, *Aguranabe* was a work written on the brink of a transition. In fact, the structure of this text is highly reminiscent of a work written nearly 60 years earlier by Shikitei Samba 式亭三馬 (1777-1822). In *Ukiyoburo* 浮き世風呂, or *The Floating World Bathhouse*, (1809-13), a public bathhouse serves as a framework for a collection of conversations by various patrons who visit the bathhouse. Like Samba, Robun may have chosen a neutral venue such as a restaurant to avoid censorship. Or, he may have simply been trying to avoid general criticism, since leading lights of the time such as Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 (1834-1901), an advocate of Western learning, were openly condemning *gesaku* as frivolous, useless writing. Still, the choice of a restaurant serving beef makes this a highly topical piece of writing. Such restaurants had been in existence for only a few years, and the custom of eating meat was very much part of the new trend of *bunmei kaika* 文明開化, or “civilization and enlightenment.” In addition, since Fukuzawa himself had advocated the eating of beef for health reasons,⁶ it may have seemed to Robun like a prime topic to poke fun at.

As the preface to the first volume begins, Robun appears to be echoing Fukuzawa’s advice by extolling the virtues of eating meat on the grounds that it is good for the health, the logical way of nature, and that previous Buddhist prohibitions against meat are unenlightened and superstitious. However, as the preface continues, Robun weaves in some less enlightened references to meat, such as the raccoon soup mentioned in the *Kachikachi Yama* folktale,⁷ and the writing takes on a decidedly satirical tone. The preface then invites people from all classes –

⁵ Maeda Ai, “From Communal Performance to Solitary Reading: The Rise of the Modern Japanese Reader,” trans. James A. Fujii, in *Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 234.

⁶ See “Bunmei kaika zassan and bunmei kaika,” *Meiji bunka zenshū*, vol. 24 (Nihon hyōron shinsha, 1967).

⁷ In this folktale, a troublesome raccoon has been caught by an old man living in the mountains, and is about to be made into soup. The raccoon manages to escape, but kills the old man’s wife in the process. However, a rabbit, who is a friend of the old couple, sees the raccoon escape and vows revenge. The rabbit convinces the raccoon to show off his strength by carrying a load of wood, and then follows behind, striking a piece of flint which eventually sets the wood on fire and burns the raccoon. *Kachikachi* refers to the sound of the rabbit striking the flint.

samurai, farmer, craftsman and merchant – to partake of this enlightening food,⁸ reminding the reader that, at least in this restaurant, class distinctions no longer regulate food choices and other aspects of daily life, as they did during the Edo period.⁹

As the preface ends and the text moves into the interior of the restaurant, the language shifts to the vernacular, thus reinforcing the fact that we have left the world of Fukuzawa and officialdom behind, and entered the realm of the carnival. The first patron to appear is adorned in all the latest Western apparel and accessories. He proudly displays a cheap watch, indicating that he is clearly not wealthy, but once inside the restaurant, he is free to take on the identity of a highly enlightened modern man, one who knows the value of eating meat. Intellectually, he places himself right alongside Fukuzawa, and makes clear the connection between the eating of beef and so-called enlightened, Western thinking:

We really should be grateful that even people like ourselves now eat beef, thanks to the fact that Japan is steadily becoming a truly civilized country. Of course, there are some unenlightened boors who cling to their barbaric superstitions and say that eating meat defiles you so much that you can't pray any more before Buddha and the gods. Such nonsense shows they simply don't understand natural philosophy. Savages like that should be made to read Fukuzawa's article on eating beef. In the West, they're free of superstitions.¹⁰

Despite his pretensions, this first character actually seems quite sophisticated in comparison to some of the patrons who follow. One particularly unsavory character is a foul-smelling country samurai who appears in a dirty, ragged old kimono with unkempt hair bound up in wild disarray, like “flames of fire.” Still, he presents himself as a force to be reckoned with in the confines of the beef bowl restaurant, as he wields his dirty chopsticks like a dagger, assumes an attack pose, and “beats out time with them while singing out in a loud, menacing voice.” Yet even this seemingly down-and-out samurai seems to have read his Fukuzawa. After strutting around for a while in a drunken stagger, he eventually plops himself down beside another customer and comments,

I guess you really like beef . . . You should truly savor it. When prices get this high, some of my crazy friends use it as an excuse to go to a Japanese restaurant. This beef is the best product, not only because of its superb taste, but also because it's an enlightened, nutritious food. Oh, excuse me . . .¹¹

⁸ Kanagaki Robun, *Meiji no bungaku* 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2002), pp. 270-71. All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

⁹ For example, Fukuzawa begins *Gakumon no susume* (*Encouragement of Learning*) by emphasizing the egalitarianism of all people. See *Fukuzawa Yukichi zenshū* 3 (Keio gijuku daigaku shuppankai, 2002).

¹⁰ Trans. Donald Keene. In *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology* 1, ed. Donald Keene (New York: Grove Press, 1960) p. 32.

¹¹ Robun Kanagaki, *Meiji no bungaku*, vol 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2002), pp. 277-8.

In short, each customer can park his social and economic status at the door, and become anything he wishes within the confines of the beef bowl restaurant. As a site of carnival, this is a public, temporary location where people stop by to rejuvenate themselves before heading back out into the official world. Clearly, the restaurant is the one unifying factor in this text. There is almost no action or interaction in *Aguranabe*; in fact, many of the sketches are done entirely in monologue. In addition, the work itself has no temporal qualities outside of the fact that it is set in early Meiji Japan. The sketches themselves could easily be rearranged without altering the integrity of the work, giving the overall effect of a highly fragmented text.

Despite its obvious parallels with earlier *gesaku* works, there are small points in *Aguranabe* that foreshadow an expanding notion of place. One patron who visits the restaurant makes reference to an article about Kanagaki Robun in the *Yokohama Mainichi* 横浜毎日, which reported two days in a row how, after being fined for relieving himself in the street, he then composed a humorous poem about the incident. The patron is clearly intrigued by the story, although he doubts its veracity.¹² Indeed, whether or not the account is actually true is of no consequence; it is the reference to newspapers which adds an air of credibility to the story, thereby enhancing interest, and suggesting that the realm of the carnival could indeed exist outside the walls of the restaurant.

III. *Takahashi Oden yasha monotagari*: Carnival on a Grand Scale

In 1872, shortly after the publication of *Aguranabe*, Robun announced that he would give up *gesaku*, which the government had denounced as frivolous and immoral.¹³ Although this announcement may very well have been motivated by commercial gain, Robun did shift to a career in journalism, working briefly for the *Yokohama mainichi shinbun* 横浜毎日新聞 before starting his own paper, the *Kanayomi shinbun* 仮名読み新聞. The story of Takahashi Oden started out as a newspaper story about a young woman accused of robbery and murder. The incident was first reported in the *Tokyo eiri shinbun* 東京絵入り新聞 in 1876, shortly after the murder took place. Three years later in 1879, the day after Oden was executed, the *Tokyo eiri* began a 16-episode *tsuzukimono* 続き物, or serialization of this story. This was a practice that had been going on in newspapers for a few years by this time, as a strategy for maintaining reader loyalty. Robun also wrote two installments about the incident on the two days following the execution, but when he had an offer from a publisher to print it as a series of bound volumes, he announced that he would cease his newspaper serialization.¹⁴ The first two volumes were printed on movable type, possibly to expedite publication, and the remaining on woodblock prints.

¹² Ibid, p. 339.

¹³ This was most likely in response to three articles issued by the Ministry of Education. For a discussion of the three articles, see Okitsu Kaname, *Meiji shinbun koto hajime: bunmei kaika no jânarizumu* (Taishûkan shoten, 1997), p. 44-5. For a reprinting of Robun's response, see Yanagida Izumi, "Meiji shinseifu bungei no ittan," *Meiji kaikaki bungakushû* 1, p. 410.

¹⁴ These articles are reproduced in Okitsu Kaname "Kaidai" *Meiji kaikaki bungakushû* 2, *Meiji bungaku zenshû* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobô, 1966-7), pp. 426-7.

Takahashi Oden yasha monogatari is generally classified as a *dokufumono* 毒婦物, or poisonous woman story, a genre that enjoyed popularity in the 1870's and 80's. A number of versions of this story were published, and there are few solid facts. However, it is fairly certain that Oden was born in Shimomaki-mura, Kōzuke, in present day Gunma-ken. According to Robun's version, Oden was the daughter of a gambler named Ariga Seikichi, a man her mother Oharu knew before marrying Takahashi Kanzaemon, who would become Oden's adopted father. In 1872, Oden and her husband, Naminosuke, who had contracted leprosy, left for Tokyo in hopes of seeking a cure. After her husband died along the way, strangled by Oden according to Robun's version, she continued the vagabond lifestyle on her own. The text recounts various liaisons and adventures that Oden has along the road, until she eventually ends up in Tokyo, with an acquaintance by the name of Gotō Kichizō. The two had planned to meet a friend of Oden's who wanted to borrow money, but when the friend does not show up, they head off to an inn to spend the night. It is here that the murder takes place. In her deposition, Oden pleads self-defense, claiming that Kichizō tried to rape her, but she is eventually found guilty of robbery and murder, and beheaded.

Although *Takahashi Oden* is part of the *gesaku* tradition, this story is clearly significantly different from *Aguranabe*. To begin with, there is more focus on place in terms of attention to detail. In *Aguranabe*, the physical appearance of the characters is described in great detail, but no indication is given as to the physical setting of the restaurant. This contributes to the fragmented sense of place in *Aguranabe*, as discussed earlier. However, in *Takahashi Oden*, places are clearly defined and described. The opening passage of this work, which informs the reader that Gotō Kichizō was killed on the 26th day of the eighth month of the ninth year of Meiji, at an inn owned by Ōtani Saburō in Asakusa,¹⁵ reads more like a newspaper report than story written for entertainment. This style may have been motivated by an attempt to lend journalistic credibility to the story, thus enhancing interest, but it also helps provide the text with a physical framework by embedding place more intricately within the narrative structure. The text also emphasizes the factual accuracy of this version of Takahashi Oden's life, first in the conclusion of the opening section,¹⁶ and then at various points throughout the text. Specific names, dates and places also continue to appear throughout the work, giving the impression that the story is indeed based on actual facts. Robun also frames the work in moralistic overtones. In the opening section of the work, the narrator proclaims the purpose of the story to be the edification of women and children,¹⁷ and in the final lines, after the execution of Oden, the reader is reminded that this story has shown how "the evil perish and the good prosper."¹⁸ This technique of framing a work of literature within the concept of *kanzen chōaku* 勧善懲悪, rewarding good and punishing evil, was particularly common in Edo period kabuki, and by no means a new technique. Nevertheless,

¹⁵ Kanagaki Robun, "Takahashi Oden yasha monogatari" *Meiji kaikaaki bungakushū 2, Meiji Bungaku zenshū* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1977), p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

it helps lend weight, and possibly credibility, to this version of the life of Takahashi Oden. Still, this is not to imply that the entire text maintains a serious tone. The opening scene of the second chapter, which focuses on Oden's mother Oharu as a young woman, is neither moralistic nor journalistic in tone:

The music from the Uzusuna Festival sounded on the waters of the faraway Tone River, and the sound of instruments on the country stage reached the woods in the nearby village of Kōkan. At midnight the moon had risen high and there was not one corner of the garden hut where it did not shine.

Takahashi Kanzemon has come looking for Oharu, who went out in the early evening to pay homage at the festival, and as the night grew late, had not yet come home.¹⁹ Already, at this early stage in the work, young women are being portrayed as unrestrainable, moving unseen across a dark, expansive background. In short, this is a hybrid work with a variety of narrative strategies at play.

Although the above reference to a festival clearly helps to set this work in the realm of the carnival, it is also important to note how Robun has expanded the notion of place from the confines of one small restaurant to the entire landscape of Japan. This expansion parallels the growing geographic freedom afforded travelers in early Meiji, evidenced by such changes as the abolition of checkpoints and the easing of travel restrictions. We see this most clearly for the first time when Oden and her husband flee their hometown, thus avoiding the scandal which knowledge of her husband's leprosy will eventually bring. Interestingly, however, Mark Silver has noted that, despite the amount of traveling that Oden does, we never actually see her on the road, struggling with the daily difficulties of a long journey.²⁰ Instead, she just seems to appear in new locations, giving the impression that traveling and movement are simple and effortless for her. Because of this sense of geographic freedom, Oden is free from what Bakhtin described as "the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order."²¹ As long as she is in motion, she can continue her life of lawlessness. Travel liberates her from the norms and laws of society, and becomes the site of carnival in this text.

However, once Oden is taken into police custody and her freedom of movement is curtailed, the realm of the carnival disappears for her. The world of officialdom takes over, and forces her to conform to the norms of society. This is particularly apparent in her deposition, in which she contradicts her own story. At one point, she claims that Kichizō died accidentally after his attempt to rape her led to a scuffle between the two. At another point, she admits to leaving a note at the murder scene, claiming that the death was revenge for her sister's murder a few years earlier.²² These contradictory statements contribute to the appearance of her guilt, and further

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 7

²⁰ Mark Silver, "The Lies and Connivances of an Evil Woman: Early Meiji Realism and *The Tale of Takahashi Oden the She-Devil*," *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* (vol. 63, issue 1), June 2003, p. 55-6.

²¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 10.

²² Kanagaki, "Takahashi Oden," pp. 60-61.

restrict the range of options available to her. Clearly, it is lack of mobility which finally ensnares Oden. Yet even the entrapment and ultimate execution of Oden do not bring an end to the sense of the carnivalesque in this tale. After the execution, the reader learns, the body of Oden was taken to No. 5 Hospital in Asakusa and autopsied for four days, where it was discovered that “excessive fat around the brain” was the cause of her abnormal libido.²³ Again, the journalistic detail adds credibility to the account, and the reader is only left to wonder in amazement at this grotesque application of *bunmei kaika*, in which modern science is capable of so succinctly explaining something as bizarre as excessive sexual appetite.

Finally, it should be noted that tied in with this expanding notion of place is also a more expanded notion of time. The story covers over thirty years, the life of Oden and her beginnings, in part to offer up an explanation for her so-called poisonous, and ultimately, criminal behavior. In this sense, *Takahashi Oden* is considerably different, not only from *Aguranabe*, but also from other chronologically-based texts which Robun wrote. Although earlier works such as *Journey Through the West By Shank's Mare* (1870-76) do follow a chronological sequence, this is the only thread tying the events in this work together; they are not connected causally, nor do they build towards any particular conclusion. Still, although the time factor lends structure to the narrative of *Takahashi Oden*, providing a moral or scientific explanation is ultimately not what brought the story of Oden to prominence. Rather, it was the sensationalistic life of a young woman whose promiscuity reached heights never before seen, thanks to the expanding freedoms in the early Meiji period. In other words, the story of the poisonous woman Takahashi Oden, as played out in the carnival of the early Meiji landscape, is the key factor that brought the incident to prominence.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, these two texts illustrate how Kanagaki Robun exploited the realm of the carnivalesque, and in doing so expanded and integrated the notion of place within the narrative structure of his writing. From a fragmented sense of space, in which carnival only exists within one carefully partitioned location, to a notion of carnival which crisscrosses the country, Robun's writing parallels the growing geographical and social liberties that citizens of the Meiji period came to enjoy. In addition, the new freedoms offered by an expanding media and publication industry, combined with the new possibilities in narrative structures these opportunities presented, created a framework for Robun to expand the scope of his writing.

Although this paper has sought to place Robun within the framework of a precursor to later Meiji literature, this is not to imply that a direct link exists between *gesaku* and the development of the modern *shōsetsu*. As Christine Marran has noted, “this new type of story that combined fiction, fact and ‘news’” was very much a response to customer demand, and “Robun can in many ways be seen as a *gesaku* master simply trying to survive in his later years.”²⁴

²³ Ibid, p. 61.

²⁴ Christine Marran, “Poison Women’ Takahashi Oden and the Spectacle of Female Deviance in Early Meiji,” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, English Supplement No. 9, 1995: p. 108.

Motives aside, however, Robun did explore new narrative strategies in his writing, suggesting that a variety of discourses, both native and Western, were at play in the literary landscape of early Meiji Japan.