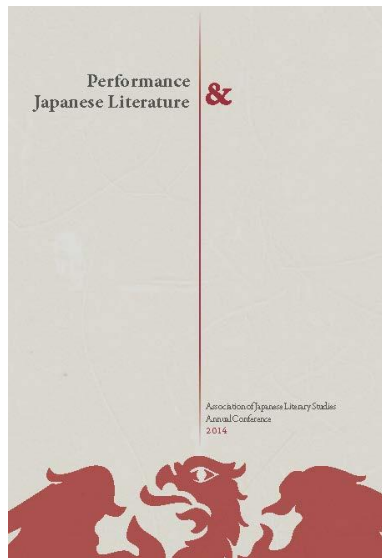


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Ken K. Ito 

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Performing a Reading of *Konjiki yasha*

Ken K. Ito

University of Hawaii

When I was completing my book on Meiji melodramatic fiction a few years ago, I came across an intriguing Meiji critical piece on Ozaki Kōyō's blockbuster novel *Konjiki yasha*. This critical piece takes a striking and unusual form that I've been trying to understand over the past few years. The focus of this conference gives me the opportunity to approach this material from the perspective of performativity. My attempt here will be to draw out a theory of reading from my material, a theory of reading that views reader response as a performative act.

My comments today center on a joint critique of *Konjiki yasha* published in the August 1902 issue of *Geibun*, a journal of literary commentary. Entitled “*Konjiki yasha jōchūgehen gappyō*” (Joint critique of *Konjiki yasha*, parts I, II, III), the printed version was presented as the record of a roundtable discussion held on June 29th, 1902, at the Nihonbashi Kurabu.¹ What's initially most striking about the panel discussion is its composition. The panel was an extraordinarily large one; there are seventeen participants listed at the front of the critique. The group included the influential founders of *Geibun*: Mori Ōgai, who had already published his early romantic stories and translations and had developed a formidable reputation as a critic steeped in German aesthetic theory, and Ueda Bin, whose signature translations of French symbolist poetry were still ahead of him, but who had already drawn considerable attention for his knowledge of Western literatures and his criticism of poetry. The writer of the novel, Ozaki Kōyō also participated in the panel, in his case by sending transcribed comments.² Other notables of the turn-of-the-century literary scene participated as well: the sinologist Yoda Gakkai,³ the scholars of British literature Togawa Shūkotsu and Hirata Takuboku, and the Christian critic Hoshino Tenchi. But mixed in among the statements by scholars and critics are those coming from a broad range of lay readers; these readers are identified not by proper names, like the literary men, but rather by sobriquets indicating their stations in life (for example, “a tailor from Komagome,” or simply “student”). These lay readers aren't listed at the head of the article. There were also women

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¹ “*Konjiki yasha jōchūgehen gappyō*,” in *Geibun* 1-2 (June-August 1902): 86-138. I have read this article in a facsimile of *Geibun* published by Rinsen Shoten in 1968. Hereafter cited as “Gappyō.”

² Kōyō's statement carries an indication that it was supplied via transcription (*hikki*). Thus it appears that he was not present at the discussion and that he made his contribution by supplying a transcribed version of spoken comments.

³ Like Kōyō, Gakkai too participated through transcribed comments.

present, identified only by reference to their domiciles and their sex: “a Woman from Katamachi,” “a Woman from Kōjimachi,” and “a Woman from Komagome.” The published discussion actually includes a sampling of opinion from an even wider range of readers, because one of the participants, the theater critic Kawajiri Seitan, takes it upon himself to collect the opinions of many others: a gardener, a young girl, a kept mistress, a girl taking sewing lessons, an old man, an actor, a bank clerk, the owner of a restaurant, and so on. In my count, there are 41 different speakers. There was clearly an effort to reflect in the composition of the panel the broad, diverse readership that *Konjiki yasha* enjoyed.

All of the speakers at the roundtable possess different readings of the novel and express them in contrasting socially-marked idioms. Although the interpretive approaches used by the readers vary, there is one mode of reading shared by many of the commentators that in turn generates a plethora of distinct meanings. This mode of reading, which constitutes a strong characteristic of the interpretive community dramatized here, might be called the mode of historicized moral interpretation. This mode connects *Konjiki yasha* to the social transformations of the turn of the last century, and evaluates the moral positions of the characters in historical context. Mori Ōgai, who appears under his alternate penname, Mori Inryū, speaks in this vein when he lauds Kōyō’s choice of a protagonist because he sees the loan shark as a paradigmatic figure, not so much for Meiji society, but for a transnational modernity that’s colored life “from the end of the 19th century onward.” Historians a thousand years hence, he says, will “analyze this novel, and rely on it to reconstruct the people of the present, the ideology of the present.”⁴ This perspective causes him to explicate Kōyō’s novel by recruiting the ideas of the German biologist William Henry Rolph, who, according to Ōgai, saw “insatiability... as the true nature of human beings”:

If the true nature of human beings can be found in accumulating as much as the occasion allows, and if morality must be based on this true nature, isn’t becoming a loan shark a fitting accomplishment. Moreover, even if one does not become a loan shark, someone who is beautiful must, as much as the opportunities allow, attempt to use that beauty as capital (*iro o shihon to shite*) to extend the conditions of her life. I do not know whether Kōyō consciously made the loan shark a representative of the modern human being. But there were tendencies in the currents of the times that made Kōyō produce a novel about loan sharks. There were also tendencies that made readers read this novel sympathetically. It is this current of insatiability that makes female students, who comprise the major audience for this novel, feel

⁴ “Gappyō,” 131.

something resonate in each and every one of their hearts upon seeing Miya, unsatisfied after winning the object of her affections, Kan'ichi, reach out toward the wealth of Tomiyama Tadatsugu, and, still not satisfied with that wealth, hope to gain Kan'ichi too if at all possible.⁵

There are a number of observations to be made about the way in which Ōgai connects the transnational historical phenomenon of insatiability to *Konjiki yasha*. First, by identifying beauty as a form of “capital,” he explicitly contextualizes both Rolph’s ideas and those of *Konjiki yasha* within the larger frame of capitalism. Second, Ōgai performs a slight of hand in the gendering of capitalism. As we see, he chooses Miya, the female protagonist who betrays her lover for a rich suitor, as an exemplar of capitalist morality. When he sets up the moneylender as the paradigmatic figure for modern society, he pays much less attention to Kan'ichi, the betrayed lover who actually becomes a loan shark, and focuses on Miya, whom he insists on calling a “quasi- moneylender” (*jun kōrikashi*). Ōgai has displaced onto a woman anxieties about capitalism’s moral consequences. In his reading, then, we see both historical awareness of the setting of the story in a capitalist Japan, and historical blindness to the misogyny that makes him view capitalism as a female problem.

Ueda Bin, the critic of French and English poetry, similarly displays a sense of historicity and employs a tone of cosmopolitan expertise, but he provides an entirely different reading when he introduces the observations made about *Konjiki yasha* by André Bellessort, a French journalist who visited Japan and collected his writings in *La Société Japonaise*, published in Paris in 1902, the very year of the panel. Bellessort, Bin says, mentions the work in a section on the “Future of Japanese Women,” where the French writer comments on the novel’s popularity among Japanese females. Bin paraphrases Bellessort to say that “along with the countless newspapers that daily increase their strength in relation to the education of women, inspiring a spirit of independence, modern literature edifies women as it entertains them, giving them the sense that they have a right to love.”⁶ Bin, then, uses Bellesort to read *Konjiki yasha* from within an ideology of romantic love, an ideology Bin ties to Western modernity and a progressive view of gender.

A somewhat different ideological framework appears in the comments made by Yoda Gakkai, the sinologist and playwright who at close to seventy was by far the oldest participant. True to his sinologist’s roots, Gakkai’s reading of *Konjiki yasha* is that of a Confucian moralist. He says, for example, in reference to Kan'ichi that he “can’t understand why a man of learning (*gakumon no aru hito*) would become a loan shark because he had a change of heart due

⁵ “Gappyō,” 132-33.

⁶ “Gappyō,” 137.

to his feelings for a woman.”⁷ The operative term in this particular opinion is “man of learning;” Gakkai’s use of this term reveals the Confucian association of education with moral training. His resistance to understanding Kan’ichi stems from certain historically located expectations, based upon gender and educational status, which say that elite male rectitude should be above the moral distractions of a mere woman.

Whether we speak of Ōgai, or Bin, or Gakkai, we can see that their enunciations are deeply tied to historically constructed gender- and status-based assumptions brought to the reading of *Konjiki yasha*: these are male intellectuals who produce contrasting interpretations of Kōyō’s novel on the basis of their cultural touchstones, whether these have to do with German social theory, French journalism, or Confucian moralism.

Gender- and status-based reading is something we also observe among the women. A good example here is the Woman from Katamachi. Because she’s only identified by where she lives, we can’t locate this woman socially with any precision, but we can tell that she comes from a *yamanote* area. Katamachi condemns Miya through reference to the education of women:

How much education could Miya have had? I think she must have only graduated from primary school and then received lessons in calligraphy or sewing....Kōyō must have portrayed a weak-willed woman who hasn’t received the kind of education that would give her a sense of principle, and thus a will and a capacity for proper judgment or consideration, and who therefore is led astray by wealth out of the simple female urge to eat things that are tasty, take life easy, wear good clothes, dress up and augment her natural beauty, all the while knowing that this is wrong but unable to reconsider.... Though there are things to be pitied about her, a woman like this, despite her beauty, must be rejected on moral grounds.⁸

As we can see, Katamachi is a reader who constructs a binary between temptation and the morality inculcated through education. She’s a bourgeois reader who clearly believes in the Meiji ideology of education as a determinant of status and moral worth.

I don’t want to leave you with the impression that reading through a historicized morality is the only mode of interpretation practiced by the participants in the roundtable. There are numerous other interpretive frameworks brought to the reading of *Konjiki yasha*, but the common denominator is that these are all tied to status, occupation, and gender.

⁷ “Gappyō,” 126.

⁸ “Gappyō,” 91-92.

The gardener, for example, critiques Kōyō for being seasonally imprecise in his use of botanical references: “If it’s the middle of January, then the plum blossoms in Atami seem to be too far along.”⁹ And the son of a shop selling art supplies concentrates his comments on the novel’s illustrations:

In volumes one through three, the art on the frontispieces of *Konjiki yasha* seems totally inept. Volume One has Takeuchi Keishū’s rendering of the moonlit night on the shore at Atami. In the picture, though, it looks like daylight, and the sense of a night scene is entirely lost...What’s more, the single-mindedness of the characters doesn’t come through; Miya looks older than she should; and the general coloring of the picture is truly cheap.¹⁰

If it’s possible to read a novel through its illustrations or its seasonal precision, it’s also valid to read through kimono, which is what the Woman from Komagome does. In the scene that draws this woman’s attention, Miya, visiting the mansion of an aristocratic friend of her husband’s, wears a crested kimono of textured gray silk crepe, over an under-kimono of pink damask, all pulled together with an amber-colored brocade obi, decorated with design motifs from the Heian court.

Let’s take a short look at the clothing worn by Miya as she appears in *Konjiki yasha*. If we think about the way she’s dressed visiting the Tazumi mansion, it might seem a little too grand for the wife of a businessman. Perhaps it’s unavoidable since she’s wearing a crested kimono. But there’s a great deal you can do through the combination of colors for the obi, the kimono, and the under-robe. With the color choices in this scene, it would seem that Miya is going all out for elegance. She’s someone who as a girl had been unable to dress up to her heart’s content, and she had decided to marry Tomiyama for his money, so there’s nothing strange about her pursuing her tastes, wrapping herself in high quality things, and trying to just be gorgeous. Her apparel might be criticized for being too lavish, but when it comes to costly things, then they naturally become showy and opulent, and conversely can seem somewhat vulgar. If we think about the change in her situation, these preferences seem appropriate.¹¹

⁹ “Gappyō,” 98.

¹⁰ “Gappyō,” 97.

¹¹ “Gappyō,” 117.

The Woman from Komagome reminds us that in our day we've lost the capacity to read the Meiji semiotics of clothing. If we read with her mastery of the kimono as sign, we have a deeper understanding of Miya, the girl of middling background who gives up everything for wealth.

I'm only scratching the surface, but I hope I've demonstrated one aspect of the theory of reading dramatized by the joint critique. What underlies the act of interpretation here are "cultural competences" of multiple and varied kinds tied to gender, status, and occupation. More is at work here than just an acknowledgement of *Konjiki yasha's* popularity across status and gender boundaries. This interpretive community is defined not by agreement over meaning, but rather the awareness that positionality matters in the interpretation of a literary work and that meaning will thus necessarily be multiple and contingent.

Implicit in the socially located, multi-perspectival approach of the joint critique is an understanding that the author is not the source for a singular and privileged meaning for the text. Ozaki Kōyō does insert his voice to present an ideological framework for understanding *Konjiki yasha* as a work dramatizing the melodramatic conflict between the "MOMENTARY" power of money and the eternal power of love.

In life there are two great sources of POWER that work to build social connections. To say what they are: love and gold. But, to my mind, the strength of gold is MOMENTARY. No matter that its strength is enormous, it cannot be maintained forever. I believe that, in direct contrast to this, the strength of love reigns eternal and unchanging over life. Thus what truly holds life tightly together is love. I created this piece because I wanted to write about this.¹²

Although some critics, including me, have employed Kōyō's comments out of context to support a variety of arguments, what needs emphasis here is that, in the joint critique, Kōyō is only one among 41 voices commenting on the novel. In this interpretive community, textual meaning can't be reduced to an author's intention. Rather, meaning can only arise in the diverse encounters between a text and its manifold readers positioned in different ways.

In the last part of this talk, I want to show how a consideration of performatives deepens our understanding of these encounters between the text and its readers. To do this, I want to start by mentioning that, at one point in the roundtable, two really unexpected panelists break into the discussion. One is "Wanibuchi Tadayuki speaking from beyond the grave." (This is the name of the loan shark who becomes Kan'ichi's mentor in the moneylending business.) The other unexpected panelist is "Hazama Kan'ichi," the betrayed lover turned

¹² "Gappyō," 137-38. Capitalized words appear in capitalized English in the original text.

moneylender who's one of the novel's two protagonists. Kan'ichi comments on the profits to be gained from writing fiction:

Mr. Kōyō has been writing about me for 6 years, and if you say that his monthly salary is 150 yen, then he's made 1800 yen in a year, 10,800 yen in six years. If writers can make this much, I should have quit loan sharking and become a novelist.¹³

A statement like this is a reminder that writers exist in the same cash nexus as loansharks, but much more importantly the intrusion of fictional characters into a critical discussion points to an understanding of reading as a joint act of fabulation in which readers participate in the realization of fantasy. Reading here is not conceived as passive reception. Only an active reader, aware of his or her contribution to the fictional enterprise, can appropriate a character, turn him into a reader of the text in which he appears, and make him speak back to the author. The reception of *Konjiki yasha* occurs in a critical space that exuberantly recognizes the role played by the reader in interpreting the text.

The playful presence of Hazama Kan'ichi brings up the likelihood that many more of the voices included in the panel are made up. The "Gappyō" clearly carries on some of the practices of the Edo-period *hyōbanki*, a genre that delivered evaluations of all manner of cultural phenomena through fictionalized voices.¹⁴ If some of the respondents at the roundtable are patently fictional, like Hazama Kan'ichi, who's to say that others too haven't been imagined into being? This question becomes especially pressing in relation to the speakers identified not by name but by social role. The priest, the tailor, the gardener and some of the women seem too restricted to their roles; they're performances of social types. They're more than likely creatures realized through the ventriloquized voices of a few male critics. Should we then dismiss what we see here as a kind of critical blackface in which elite male readers appropriate the positions of others lower on the social hierarchy? I tend to think we can understand this joint critique better if we continue to ask what it embodies as a theory of reading.

First, the urgency to disperse critical responses among a large range of positionalities, even to the point of fictionalizing some of them, underlines, rather than contradicts, a theory of reading in which meaning is multiple and contingent, and based upon the cultural competencies associated with various social positionalities.

Second, there's a further effect of the fictionalized voices that causes us to reconsider the statements made by the men of letters. When fictional

¹³ "Gappyō," 119-20.

¹⁴ The most useful treatment of *hyōbanki* I have found is Nakano Mitsutoshi's *Edo meibutsu hyōbanki annai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1985). I have also found useful Jacob Raz's "The Audience Evaluated: Shikitei Samba's *Kyakusha hyōbanki*," in *Monumenta Nipponica* 35 (Summer 1980): 199-221.

voices are included, they call attention to the fact that nothing guarantees the status of these statements as the enunciations of men who have an objective and prior existence. Mori Ōgai and Ueda Bin are neither more nor less present in the printed version of the roundtable than the gardener, the woman from Komagome, or Hazama Kan'ichi. They exist merely as performed voices. This quality is highlighted when we note that Mori Ōgai appears as Mori Inryū, a less frequently used penname. Neither is the same as Mori Rintarō, Ōgai's given name and the name he used as the editor of *Geibun*. Ueda Bin appears as Ueda Ryūson, the penname he frequently employed at the turn of the century. The slippiness of the penname signals the slippiness of identity in the act of reading as it's conceived in the roundtable. To read here means to perform a response to a text, a performance that is keyed on a position that may be more or less fictionalized.

The theory of reading implied in the joint critique, then, takes us toward a performative view of reading. If reading can only be done from and through a positionality, that positionality comes into being through an interaction with the text. A reading of a text is not a description of a pre-existing and objective meaning articulated by a pre-existing reader. To interpret a text is not a constative activity. Rather, it's performative in the sense of being an action that brings into being something that did not already exist. Judith Butler has said that we need to understand the performance of gender “not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting the identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*.”¹⁵ The joint critique is a critical intervention that calls attention to the compelling illusion of performing ourselves as readers.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Theatre Journal* 40 (December 1988), 520.