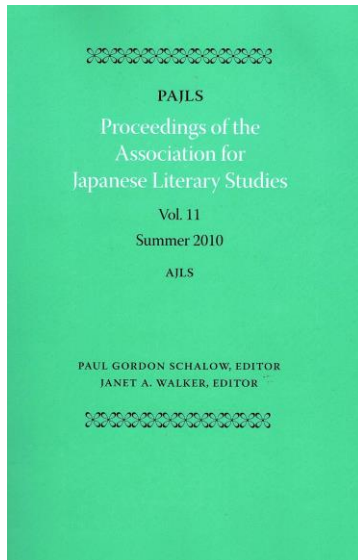


“Between Men in Izumi Kyōka’s *Yōken kibun*”

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# Between Men in Izumi Kyôka's *Yôken kibun*

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Let me begin with a quote by Eve Sedgwick:

The project of the present book will be to show how issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist. . . . I have tended, therefore, in these chapters not to stress the alterity of disappeared or now-supposed alien understandings of same-sex relations but instead to invest attention in those unexpectedly plural, varied, and contradictory historical understandings whose residual—indeed whose renewed—force seems most palpable today. My first aim is to denaturalize the present—in effect, to render less destructively presumable “homosexuality as we know it today.”<sup>1</sup>

I want to today suggest a way of reading Izumi Kyôka's *Yôken kibun* (The tale of the enchanted sword, 1920) in relation to this quote, a way of reading made possible by one of the models pioneered by Sedgwick.

*Yôken kibun* is a “heterosexual” tale. A summary of the story would go something as follows. The year is 1793. A samurai, Gennoshin, and his young page Seisaburô, are visiting the provinces of Koishikawa. They encounter an outcaste woman (a *torioi*) Omachi,<sup>2</sup> who gives Seisaburô an iris blossom (*kakitsubata*). Urged by his companions, Seisaburô discards the blossom but he has been irrevocably polluted as well as enchanted by her, and he wanders about in a daze trying to find her again.

A second tale is embedded in the first. During their trip to Koishikawa, Gennoshin and Seisaburô are told of a mystery of two underwater caves by a waterfall bordering a nearby temple, caves which have long been the cause of repeated

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<sup>1</sup>Sedgwick 1990, 47–48.

<sup>2</sup>*Torioi* were beggars who played the samisen and sang for handouts. *Torioi*, and thus Omachi, belonged to the Edo period *hinin* subclass of “untouchables.” It was believed that pollution could be passed from a *hinin* through physical touch.

drownings. Previous attempts to eradicate the river demon—or *kappa*—believed to be the cause of the drownings, have failed. The temple caretaker, Sakuden, dives into the caves to challenge and eradicate the *kappa*, discovering and removing a strange sword. Mysteriously, the sword appears to return repeatedly on its own to the cave where it was found. Eventually the two tales are interwoven, as it is revealed that Omachi has been stealing the sword and returning it to one of the caves to stab herself, thereby purifying her polluted blood.<sup>3</sup> Seisaburô pulls her from the cave and drinks her blood as she dies, receiving both her pollution and a mysterious knowledge of sword-smithing.

First, I want to focus on the trope of the river imp, or *kappa*. One narrative impetus for the tale is precisely the eradication, or subjugation, of a *kappa*. Gennoshin also refers to Seisaburô as “quite a *kappa*,” which, common enough a phrase, is an interesting choice of words in this context.<sup>3</sup> As you here most likely know, the *kappa* is a mythical creature of Japanese folklore, with differing local versions. Usually found in rivers, or other freshwater sources, the *kappa* is generally a skillful swimmer, often depicted with a saucer or plate (or depression) filled with water at the top of its head—and if that saucer cracks or dries up, the *kappa* dies. The *kappa* sports a beak, and on its back, a shell like a turtle. Although some *kappa* are depicted as more mischievous than evil, others indeed drown swimmers, or drag people who venture near their watery lairs into the water and drown them as well. *Kappa* are also known for a particular erotic fondness for young men. This example is well illustrated in the popular and well-known 1763 Edo tale “Rootless Weeds” (*Nenashigusa*), in which a *kappa* takes the form of a samurai to seduce a famous kabuki *onnagata*. *Kappa*, I am told, stink, and apparently, according to some sources, have 3 anuses. Moreover, they are known for stealing people’s *shirikodama*—a ball or jewel that it is imagined people have inside their anuses, and either eating this *shirikodama* or else using it to pay taxes to the turtle king. People whose *shirikodama* have been stolen have weakened sphincters, and become cowardly.<sup>4</sup> And, according to Gregory Pflugfelder, “In prison slang as recently as the 1970s, *kappa* signified the penetrating party in male-male sexual relations.”<sup>5</sup>

Although I don’t want to over-read Kyôka’s use of the *kappa* as a symbol of things anal, including anal intercourse and male-male relations and as a sobriquet for Seisaburô, I do think the positioning of the second tale—or “*kappa* eradication,” which posits the *kappa* as associated with both danger and anuses—is certainly complicit with the heteronormative project of modernity proper (which

<sup>3</sup>Izumi 1926, 641. Omachi relates her attempt at purification by sword to the successful self-cleansing of the early Edo Period Jôdô (Pure Land) Buddhist priest, Yûten. Legend has it that Yûten thrust the sword of the Fire Deity, Fudô Myôo (Sanskrit: Acala) down his throat to vomit “bad” blood which had hindered his memorization of the sutras. See Izumi 1926, 674–75.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Japanese Wikipedia.

<sup>5</sup>Pflugfelder 1999, 197.

seeks to pathologize homosexuality) and the modernization of narrative as tales of heterosexual maturation. Homosexuality, or the *kappa* as a demon that must be eradicated, is then the narrative justification for the second plot of the tale.

But what of the primary tale which enfolds this secondary narrative within itself? Surprisingly, the narrative discourse, or the bulk of the narration, is composed of descriptions of events that are *supplementary* to the plot I have laid out above. And in fact, both Seisaburō and Omachi themselves are in *terms of quantity of narration (or numbers of passages) devoted to their tale, almost peripheral*.

The narration throughout is saturated with little anecdotes, asides, and backstories about other characters, hence the text is saturated with the flavor of Edo, but these anecdotes, etc. have virtually nothing to do with the plot that ties it all together for us in some form of closure near the end of the tale—which is, of course, the doomed love story between Omachi and Seisaburō. The substance of the heteronormative modern narrative is, in this sense, pure form, and what fills that form is the copresent premodern structural logic of non-closure, and thematically speaking, a homosociality open to homoerotics.

Hence one might postulate that *Kyōka*'s story follows a logic contradictory to a modern narrative or novelistic convention. Modernity is of course also about the development of narratives. Narratives differ from other modes of organization in part because they tell stories. Roland Barthes pointed out that it was “not mere coincidence that realism in the novel and objectivity in historiography [history and writing] (both 19th century) develop simultaneously—they share a ‘dependency on a specifically narrative mode of discourse, the principal purpose of which was to substitute surreptitiously a conceptual content (a signified) for a referent that it pretended merely to describe.’”<sup>6</sup> Whether literary or historical, modern narration gives “deep” meaning to the events it narrates, and organizes its representations of events (fictive or real) into coherent stories with causes and effects, linearity, relation between parts, description and explanations, and usually, closure or a kind of teleology. Or, more simply, to paraphrase an example from Chekhov, as quoted by H. Porter Abbott, if there is a gun mentioned early in the narrative, it had better be discharged as some point.<sup>7</sup>

But very few of *Yōken kibun*'s guns discharge. As Shinoda Hajime put it in regard to another *Kyōka* text: “I . . . suffered as I began to read this unknown long fiction until I had read about one-third of it. The threads of myriad plots were left in a tangle, and I was unable to discern, endlessly, anything that resembled an expressed theme . . .”<sup>8</sup>

*Yōken kibun* thus *displays an ambivalence* over the cause-effect story, or modern narrative proper, or, rephrased—the modern teleology of heteronormativity.

<sup>6</sup>As discussed and quoted in White 1987, 37. Addition in brackets is mine.

<sup>7</sup>Abbott 2008, 56.

<sup>8</sup>Shinoda 1981, 39. The text Shinoda is referring to is *Sankai hyōbanki* (Account of the rumors of the land and sea), 1929.

Although Seisaburô is thus a marginal character in many ways, as I have just described it, he is also the *central* figure from a perspective of plot. He *is* the *reason* why Gennoshin has gone to the provinces. Gennoshin has come to the area seeking a teacher to train Seisaburô in the theater arts of some sort or another, in order that Gennoshin might be able to keep him “close” into adulthood—a suggestion of a codified nod to a homosocial attachment unthinkable today, fortified by the description of Seisaburô as a *bishônen* (beautiful youth). As such, it is desire for Seisaburô on Gennoshin’s part that *puts the events of the narrative into play, or action, that moves the narration forward, and motivates the telling of the tale*. In other words, there is an *implicit* although unelaborated homosocial motivation for the tale, which includes the *possibility* of a homoerotic dimension. Situating the tale in Edo, or the past, is a component facilitating the normative expression of this homosocial desire. And equally important, it is the *thwarting of that desire*, or the replacement of a homosocialism with a heteronormativity, in the form of the reciprocal desire of Omachi and Seisaburô for one another, and homophobia, in the need to *eradicate the kappa* that accompanies a partial transformation of the Edo-esque tale into a modern narrative. The modern heterosexual agenda enfolds the premodern homosocial narrative trajectory, providing a cause-effect narrative that lends narrative coherence to the otherwise unruly subplots and asides that challenge any sense of development or teleology.

That the heterosexualization of desire also drags men into the area of abjection is another story—but here let me also just note that in her pollution and death Omachi makes possible the story of Seisaburô.<sup>9</sup>

The paper I have just presented is still very much research in progress, and so forgive me for leaving you without cogent closure, and perhaps with more questions than answers—a little like *Yôken kibun* itself.

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<sup>9</sup>See the chapters on Kyôka in my *Dangerous Women* for more on this point.

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