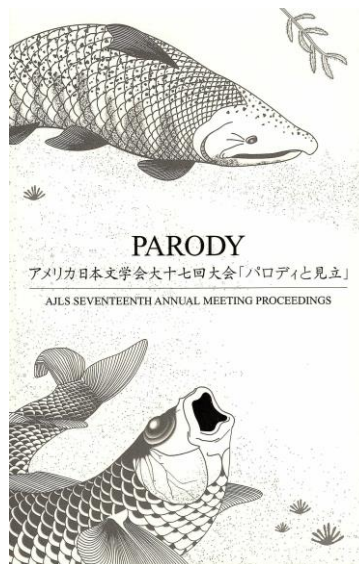


“‘Seeing as’: *Mitate* and Parody in *Haikai* Linked Verse”

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“SEEING AS’—MITATE AND PARODY IN
HAIKAI LINKED VERSE”

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I suppose it was inevitable that, in a conference dedicated to the theme of parody, the term *mitate* (見立て) would make more than one appearance. In fact, I have on more than one occasion seen the term translated simply as “parody,” particularly in the case of *mitate-e*, or parodic woodblock prints. However, the meaning of the term is far too fluid to be captured in a single supposed English equivalent, and *mitate* of the type discussed in Yamashita Noriko’s keynote address for this conference can be a far cry from what we see in poetic practice. In fact, when the journal *Nihon no Bigaku* dedicated a special issue to the term in 1996, they deemed no fewer than three different versions necessary to render the term for their English table of contents page: “Symbolic Analogy,” “Substitution for a Superior,” and “Dynamic Perspective.”¹ The slippery nature of the term rejects the possibility of easy translation, and all three of these attempts might be seen as failures in that one who doesn’t already know what *mitate* is would probably not be enlightened by the translations alone. However, each of the phrases does manage to capture certain aspects of the concept, and the choices reveal much about the qualities the editors were attempting to evoke.

The use of the term “Symbolic Analogy” as a translation highlights one of the difficulties in defining *mitate*—how to distinguish it from metaphor. This definition would seem to include the *mitate* which is most familiar in the context of Heian poetics, sometimes translated as “elegant confusion” such as that seen in *Kokinshū* I:60, by Ki no Tomonori: “*Miyoshino no/yamabe ni sakeru/sakurabana/yuki ka to nomi zo/ayamatarekeru*”—“The cherry blossoms/have bloomed on the mountainside/of lovely Yoshino!/I had mistakenly thought them/merely drifts of snow.”² A technique widespread in the poetry of the period, this *mitate* shares with later usages of the term the visual conflation of disparate objects, such as scattering plum blossoms and falling snow, autumn leaves and embroidery, drops of dew and pearls, etc. but relies on

¹ *Nihon no Bigaku* 日本の美学 24 (1996). English table of contents on p. 122.

² *Kokinwakashū*. Vol. 7 of *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū*. Shōgakusan, 1971. Translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

the conceit of being unable to distinguish between them for its interest. In fact, aside from this psychological perspective, there is little to distinguish this technique from simply a visual “metaphor,” and in its own time the technique was more commonly referred to as *nisemono*, or “things that resemble.” It is only with the clarity of hindsight that we can see in the technique the aspects of multivalenced images that would define *mitate* in a later ages, and establish *mitate*’s link to parody.

The second of the terms chosen by the editors of the “*Mitate*” issue of *Nihon no bigaku*, “Substitution for a Superior,” is probably meant to refer to *mitate* of a much later age and a very different type. While the term still relates to visual conflation, the divide between the two conflated objects is one of status, age, or reputation. The common was conflated with the elegant, the modern with the ancient, and the respected with the lowly. In Edo period *mitate-e* prints, for example, characters ostensibly drawn from the *Tale of Genji* might be shown dressed in modern garb or disciples of the Buddha might bear the faces of famous kabuki actors, relying on the inherent tension between elite literature and popular culture, classical tradition and modern fashion; and aristocratic elegance and the spectacle of the pleasure quarters.

One of the editors of this issue of *Nihon no Bigaku*, Imamichi Tomonobu, attempts to take this concept a step further in a short article in that issue entitled “*Chōetsu no dyunamiiku*” or “The Dynamics of Transcendence.”³ In it, he suggests that this linking of elements of such disparate value points to *mitate* as an attempt to represent the transcendent in the concrete, or the aesthetically ideal in the common. While this is certainly an aspect of Edo period practice, particularly in Bashō’s haikai, it may be going too far to suggest that it is the fundamental nature of *mitate*. After all, the same term, *mitate-e*, might also be used for prints in which kabuki actors are merely depicted in roles which they had never actually acted or in which people are posed to suggest incongruous scenes; there is a cognitive disjuncture in this, to be sure, but it is difficult to attribute the appeal to an inherent difference in status. In the end, “substitution for a superior” seems particularly inadequate as a description of *mitate*’s function.

It is the third term, “Dynamic Perspective,” that comes closest to cutting across the details involved in the various techniques that have been called *mitate* to grasp the core principle: the doubling of vision and

³ Imamichi Tomonobu. “Chōetsu no dyunamiiku.” *Nihon no Bigaku* 日本の美学 24 (1996) pp. 34–35.

the ability to shift freely from one perspective to the other. The interest in Tomonori's poem lies not in the rather banal observation that white snow looks rather like white blossoms, but in the realization by the author, evoked by the suffix *keri*, of the true nature of what had been before his eyes all along. What had seemed to be one thing was now revealed to be another, not through any change in reality, but through a change in his *perception* of reality. It is for this quality that I have chosen my own translation—or perhaps more accurately “description”—for *mitate*: “seeing as.”

I did not invent the phrase, but rather borrowed it from Thomas LaMarre, who used it in his *Uncovering Heian Japan*, inspired in turn by a passage in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Lamarre used the term in relation to the visual rebus proposed in a poem by Fun'ya no Yasuhide, made famous by its inclusion in Tsurayuki's kana preface to the *Kokinshū*: *Fuku kara ni, aki no kusaki no, shiorureba, mube yama kaze o, arashi to iu ramu*. The interest in this poem is elicited by the wordplay of calling attention to the characters for *yama* (山) and *kaze* (風) as elements of the single character *arashi* (嵐). As Lamarre points out, “*arashi*” might be “seen as” either a single character or as the sum of its parts.⁴ It does not change; only the shifting perspective of the reader, guided by the lines of the poem, creates complementary meanings. Another example, this one raised by Wittgenstein in the original source of the phrase, is that of the optical illusion.⁵

Looking at the image, one first sees only one aspect, but once one notices the second—or rather, sees the image as the second aspect—one cannot then “unsee” it. The image is now defined by its duality; it is not first one image and then the other, but both and neither, determined only by the perspective of its viewer. It is a single signifier with multiple signifieds.

⁴ Thomas Lamarre. *Uncovering Heian Japan*. Duke University Press, 2000. pp. 55–56.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. G.E.M Anscombe, trans. Basil Blackwell and Mott, 1958. p. 193

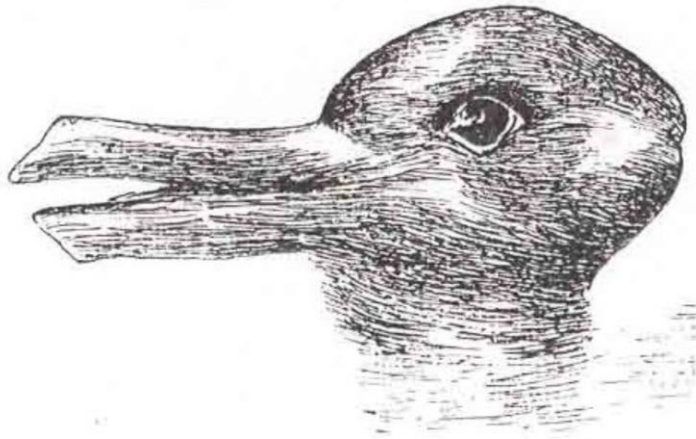


Illustration I: Wittgenstein included a simplified version of this duck-rabbit illusion to demonstrate his point.⁶

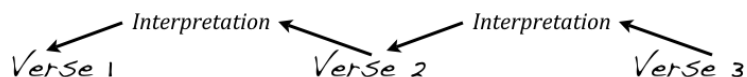
Of course, to the extent that *mitate* is a strategy used by poets and artists rather than imposed on a text by a reader or viewer, a better term might be “showing as.” It is a technique whereby a certain change in perspective is suggested, in such a way as to leave the original unchanged but suggest a new way of viewing it. A woman in modern dress is depicted, but through title, pose, or visual hints, it is suggested that the viewer is to see her as Yūgao from the *Tale of Genji*. The image of the beauty is like many others of the type, yet the viewer is invited to superimpose onto knowledge of modern culture the expectations of the classical literary character. Previously unseen links between the cultures are called to the surface and the viewers understanding of both is changed. This could certainly be used for “amusement, derision, and sometimes scorn,” the traditional limitations of parody outlined by Highet.⁷ Indeed, I have seen some works of this type described as attempts by the newly empowered urban commoner class to bring their former “betters” down a peg or two. However, this subversive aspect is a

⁶ This version of the image comes from Joseph Jastrow. “The Mind’s Eye.” *Popular Science Monthly* 54 (1899) pp. 299–312.

⁷ Quoted in Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. University of Illinois Press, 1985. p. 50.

side-effect rather than the fundamental nature of *mitate* and the true potential of the form seems to realize the full range of possibilities attributed to parody by Linda Hutcheon.⁸ This can be seen particularly clearly in the case of haikai and haikai renga, the linked verse that dominated poetic practice in the Edo period.

This process of reinterpretation based on shifting perception, the central strategy of *mitate*, is at the heart of renga practice. As a renga session progresses, each link is added as an interpretation of the verse which precedes it, imposing a new context on a verse created by a different poet.



The content of the previous verse remains unchanged, but the context, and thus the meaning, is forever altered, perhaps in ways the original poet could not have imagined. As Wittgenstein tells us in distinguishing “seeing as” from mere “seeing:”

The one man might make an accurate drawing of the two faces,
and the other notice in the drawing the likeness which the
former did not see.⁹

Meaning is not imposed on the original verse. Rather, unseen meaning is drawn out of it and brought to the surface. And no sooner is the verse as interpretation composed than it is itself re-interpreted by the verse which follows. No verse has meaning on its own; each is either the interpretation of or the subject of interpretation by another. Of course, the potential of this process for humorous, irreverent, or subversive re-interpretation is obvious, and even as renga adopted the imagery and rhetorical tools of classical poetry to develop from a kind of parlor game into a respected art form, there remained a healthy tradition of non-serious, or *mushin*, renga. It was not until unconventional renga itself gained respectability, though, as haikai renga, that *mitate* became an established strategy for linking and the art of parody was realized.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wittgenstein, p. 192.

The term *mushin* literally means “without heart,” and in this case the “heart” which was supposedly lacking was that of traditional poetic practice. When a series of renga poets began transforming linked verse into a respectable art form in the fourteenth century, they did so by imbuing it with the conventions of the classical poetic tradition. In other words, while crafting an interesting response to the preceding verse was still the ideal, the acceptable range of images and rhetorical strategies was limited to that already defined for waka. *Mushin* renga, being without heart and thus also without these limitations, continued as a parallel form which preserved the original ideals of creativity, but certainly no one at the time would have mistaken the results for art... or bothered to record the results as literary works.

The emergence of haikai renga, however, was of a different type altogether. Rather than being “free” of the heart of waka composition, its development was driven by those who were steeped in that poetic tradition. It began not as a rejection of the poetic ideals of the past, but merely as a relaxing of its limitations. Chinese or Buddhist terms, vernacular language, or common sayings, familiar in everyday speech but absent from poetic practice, were introduced into poetry. Unconventional imagery, though far from base or vulgar, could be used, though conventional seasonal associations and associated imagery remained intact. In fact, because the use of these strategies would immediately mark a composition as haikai and thus create an aesthetic effect different from more conventional renga, it must be said that haikai actually relied on familiarity with traditional poetic conventions for its unconventional effect. Haikai was as much a reaction to traditional waka conventions as post-modernism was to modernism, and in the same way it became defined specifically in terms of how it moved against the dominant tradition rather than acting as an independent one.

This talk was originally scheduled to be preceded by one by Scott Lineberger, on “Redefining haikai as parody.” To quote from his abstract:

As a form of parody, haikai is a double-voiced discourse that both imitates respected models of composition and transforms those models. Thus, haikai is a liminal form that is neither

wholly part of the respected literary tradition nor entirely outside of it.¹⁰

I could not agree more with his position, except perhaps to emphasize that haikai could never hope to be separate from the “respected literary tradition” since it necessarily defined itself in relation to it. In fact, though the Teimon and Danrin schools of *haikai* are usually compared in terms of the relative conservatism of the former in relation to the spontaneity and lack of concern for the rules of the latter, it is no exaggeration to say that they were defined not by a disregard for the rules, but by the relative extents to which they played at breaking them. Though the Danrin poets were as a whole less educated and less familiar with the entirety of the classical tradition than were their Teimon counterparts, they were if anything more reliant on using the tension between classical diction and subject matter and haikai language for aesthetic effect. One needed to know the rules in order to cleverly break them, and one needed to be familiar with the tradition in order to effectively parody it.

As Hutcheon suggests, this aspect of parody results not in a subversion of mainstream literary norms, but in a reaffirmation of them. Haikai may be transgressive, but it is “authorized transgression.” In Hutcheon’s words:

This paradox of legalized though unofficial subversion is characteristic of all parodic discourse insofar as a parody posits, as a prerequisite to its very existence, a certain aesthetic institutionalization which entails the acknowledgement of recognizable, stable forms and conventions.¹¹

Hutcheon later identifies the nature of this requirement for authorization as “recognizability.” For a parody to be successful, its target must be recognized and its cultural power thus acknowledged. It is thus no surprise that the two literary icons of the age, Bashō and Saikaku, began their careers as Teimon poets and only later moved to the Danrin school. They were innovators, to be sure, but they were also intimately familiar with the literary conventions they were challenging, and drew on those conventions extensively in creating new genres. And ultimately, their

¹⁰ Scott Lineberger “Redefining Haikai as Parody” from “Abstracts” posted on AJLS 2008 website, <http://events.arts.ubc.ca/ajls/abstracts.html>. Viewed 11 Aug. 2008.

¹¹ Hutcheon, p. 75.

efforts served to legitimize their respective art forms only when their capacity to achieve the same goals set forth for their classical forbears was revealed.

Certainly, the *haikai* poets of the Edo period were aware of this debt to the classical tradition, and *mitate* exists as a key term in many *haikai* treatises and poetry collections. The mid-seventeenth century *haikai* handbook, the *Kefukigusa*, contains a section on different types of linking, including “linking by *mitate*” or *mitate-zuke*.¹² According to this work, *mitate-zuke* involves crafting a metaphor that plays on a twist of meaning in the original verse. While the examples raised in the work itself rarely go beyond clever metaphor and punning, the technique seems to have been embraced, especially by the Danrin school. When responding to a verse, the conventional links are deliberately rejected. Instead, something within the verse that could be given a secondary meaning is sought and drawn out in the responding verse. As in the original ideals of renga composition, meaning can not be imposed on a verse, but unseen and unexpected meaning can be drawn out of it.

In a verse sequence gathered by Nishiyama Sōin, the founder of the Danrin school, for example:

The path of love; if it is not darkness, it is pain

A finger, half an inch of the tip given away

*The pickpocket caught, but his life spared*¹³

While the first verse is a general statement on the hardships of love, the second responds with a concrete example, the trope of the courtesan showing the depth of her commitment by cutting off her finger and giving it to her lover. The inclusion of such a modern theme clearly marked the verse as *haikai*, but it remained true to the intent of the first, fleshing out (so to speak) the theme. The final verse, however, uses *mitate-zuke*. While recognizing the reference, the poet chooses to work against it, taking the cut finger as that of a thief made to cut off his own finger rather than face execution. The theme of love is turned on its head and the act of devotion is turned into one of forced penance.

¹² Matsue Shigeyori. *Kefukigusa*. Iwanami Bunko, 1943.

¹³ Quoted in Aoki Takao. “Mitate to Bigaku.” *Nihon no Bigaku* 日本の美学 24 (1996) p. 37.

Saikaku described the intended result of this technique in the opening lines to his 1692 *Saikaku dokugin hyakuin jichū emaki* (Saikaku illustrated, self-annotated solo hundred verse sequence):

After [the classical age], there was Master Old Plum of Naniwa (Nishiyama Sōin); in that style, for example, one could take the smoke from Fuji for a teakettle, or *mitate* a lake as a washbasin, these compositions that spark recognition (*me no sametaru* – literally “eye-opening”) place it in the tradition of haikai.¹⁴

To Saikaku, this type of surprising twist on conventional imagery is precisely what makes *haikai* what it is. An effective *mitate* verse should result in a moment of recognition, as the secondary potential meaning within a verse is revealed. In fact, His reference to Sōin as “Master Old Plum,” is a reference to exactly such an example. It is a response by Sōin to a verse by Saikaku:

kakure mo naki/hōshi sugata to/mitatematsurite
It is plain to see, you look the very image of the priest

nagamu to te hana ni mo itashi kubi no hone
Gazing at the blossoms I feel such pain... in my neck¹⁵

While it is difficult to render fully in translation, Sōin’s responding verse plays against conventional poetic imagery while it reveals his knowledge of the poetic tradition. His verse echoes a much earlier verse by the monk, Saigyō, drawing on the reference to the “priest” of the earlier verse:

*nagamu to te/hana ni mo itaku/narenureba/chiru wakare koso/
kanashikarekere*
Gazing at the blossoms, I came to hold them so dear, that their
scattering overcame me with sadness¹⁶

¹⁴ Ihara Saikaku, *Saikaku dokugin hyakuin jichū emaki* reprinted in vol. 5 pt. 2 of *Shinpen Saikaku Zenshū*. Bensei Shuppan, 2007. pp. 998–999.

¹⁵ The exchange is preserved in a painting by Saikaku, 宗因賛西鶴画花見西行偃息 図 in from the Kakimori Bunkō collection of haiku poetry and painting. Available online at Kakimori Bunkō website, http://www.kakimori.jp/2007/06/post_13.php. Accessed 16 Aug. 2008.

¹⁶ *Shin kokin wakashū*. Vol. 11 of *Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*. Iwanami Shoten, 1992. Book 2, Poem 126.

Sōin applies a kind of parodic *honkadōri* allusion, duplicating the first two lines of the poem almost exactly with variation only in the final syllable. However, the transformation from *itaku* to *itashi* is a transformation from the classical term “extremely” to the word for “pain” current in Sōin’s own time. A modern, and thus *haikai*, term replaces a classical one, even as the reference to pain echoes the pain of sadness in the original poem. The resulting verse is a parody of both the specific verse and poetic conventions as a whole. When one gazes at the blossoms, one is supposed to feel sadness at their passing as a reminder at one’s own mortality and the transience of all things. Sōin turns the convention on its head, making the pain a physical one instead, coming from craning his neck too long. It even suggests a kind of exasperation with the idea that gazing at blossoms—and by extension the practice of poetry itself—as a pleasurable pursuit. Too much of a good thing becomes simply a “pain in the neck.”

While the playful twist on the earlier poem in Sōin’s verse may qualify as parody, it is not itself an example of *mitate*. There is, however, a kind of *mitate* “doubling” that goes on in its nature as a response to the earlier verse. While Saikaku’s verse is one of praise, casting his master Sōin in the traditional role of priest-poet, and in particular its exemplar Saigyō, Sōin’s reply deflates the comparison. By echoing the earlier verse but replacing aestheticized suffering with mundane physical pain, he highlights the incongruity between the poetic ideals embodied by the earlier poet and his own *haikai* practice. And the pleasure derived from this simultaneous awareness of sameness and difference—of the continuity of poetic practice and of the break with the past embodied by *haikai*—embodies the ideals of *mitate*.

These verses also embody the potential of parody as espoused by Hutcheon. Even as parodic works resist the conventions in the traditions they target, they rely on those very conventions for their existence. More importantly, while playfulness and transgression are frequently the goal, they lack the scornfulness and derision with which the term “parody” has frequently been saddled. In fact, despite my earlier statement against those who describe *mitate* dismissively as “mere parody,” if the full range of possibility embodied in the concept again become part of the common interpretation of the word parody, I can think of few Japanese concepts that so fully embody the term.