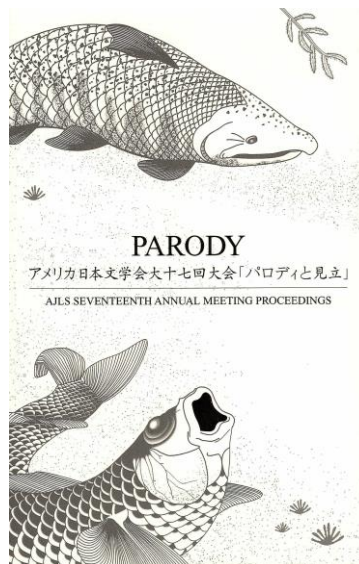


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DOES VULGARITY MAKE PARODY? THE CASE OF *ZOKU TSUREZUREGUSA*

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The early fourteenth century *Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草, or *Essays in Idleness*, of Kenkō 兼好 was one of the most read books of the Edo period; affectionate parodies (some 98 percent of them were affectionate) were simultaneously a way that the text insinuated itself into all corners and levels of the culture and a mark of the impact made by the text. In the search for what is distinctive about parody, it is tempting to make broad claims—such as that many Japanese canonical works have formal qualities that are highly conducive to parodic treatment (although it may be only that the canonization process makes parody irresistible), or that parody is, next to annotation, arguably the most common mode of reception in the Edo period—claims that only a gathering of papers such as this can dispel or (and surely this is less likely) confirm. There are many things one would like to know about parody, not the least of which is, can we recognize its presence through the titles of works and get on about our business? If a text purports to be a vulgar (*zoku* 俗) version of a classic, is it not almost certain to be a parody?

In my early days of studying *Tsurezuregusa* reception, I devoted a good deal of time to puzzling out which of the parade of Edo period works that related in some way to *Tsurezuregusa* should be classed as influenced by, adaptations of, parodies on, or imitations of the original, categories that the scholarship seemed to distinguish from one another conscientiously and consciously. (“Seemed to” because literary dictionaries and even other forms of criticism start their tasks from the assignment of categories, although there is often disagreement over definitions, schemes, and individual instances of designation of categories.) Most critics reserved “parody” (もじり or パロディ) for those works that deployed similarities to the original text in the interest of humor (the laughter of recognition), or for those that mocked the occasional pretentiousness of Kenkō, such as *Tsurezuregusa modoki hyōban* 徒然草嫌評判 of 1672. They were most likely to identify as “adaptations” (*hon'an* 翻案) works that have a *kusa* or *gusa* at the end (*Hisomegusa* ひそめ草, 1644–5, *Kuyamigusa* 梅草, 1647, *Mezamashigusa* 目覚し草, 1649, *Sorezoregusa* それぞれ草, 1681 and another of 1704, *Suiyosōhitsu* 睡餘操筆, aka *Zoku tsurezuregusa* 続徒然

草, by Shimizu Shunryū 清水春流, 1671, *Tawaregusa* たはれ草, 1789).¹ Nakamura Yukihiro went so far as to say that virtually all works with this final element in the title are followers of Kenkō's style on some level.² Parody, additionally, tends to be the nomenclature for works that have some kind of common, low, or vulgar reference in the title: *Inu tsurezure* 犬徒然, 1619, 犬つれづれ, 1653, *Shin yoshiwara tsunegusa* 新吉原常々草, 1689, *Yoshiwara tsurezuregusa* 吉原徒然草, 1704, *Irozato tsurezuregusa* 色里徒然草, 1707?, *Keisei tsuretsuregusa* 傾城つれづれ草, 1737, *Koinu tsurezure* 子犬つれづれ, 1789–1800, *Kaibutsu tsurezuregusa* 怪物徒然草, 1792, *Bakemono tsuretsure zōdan* 化物つれづれ雑談, 1795. *Tsubekobegusa* つべこべ草 of 1786 also falls into the parody column for its title use of a vernacular word for “chattiness つべこべ” that twists the pronunciation of “idleness つれづれ.” These are what we might call “true parody” in the common sense of works that skewer others, although one may have a different definition on the basis of the totality of these papers.

If we broaden our survey to the present, we find that the moniker “grasses of idleness” has achieved a remarkable degree of saturation in the literary world. This title, whose origins we cannot verify (did Kenkō grab the word *tsurezure* from his own preface, or did a later copyist?), has become a generic term that signals everything from random musings on any subject—the ephemeral end of the spectrum—to the collected wit and wisdom (suitably ponderous) of whomever, on the subject of whatever. They do not need to reference Kenkō through humor or mockery, or even subject matter. These tend to be regarded as “imitative” (*tsurezuregusa-teki* 徒然草的) of Kenkō's original. The year 1861 produced a type of title that becomes a trend, in *Haikai tsurezuregusa* 俳諧つれづれ草, passed off as the work of Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉. A fierce number of such works—*Kenchiku tsurezuregusa* 建築徒然草, *Rekishū tsurezuregusa* 歴史つれづれ草, Tezuka Osamu's 手塚治虫 *Konchū tsurezuregusa* 昆虫つれづれ草—haunt the shelves of bookstores even today, where they commonly appear under the banner *zuihitsu* 随筆, or “following the brush,” although they generally follow a focus, as indicated by their titles, more than any random train of thought, as symbolized by the writing instrument.³

¹ It should be noted that the genre identifications of these works present another, possibly messier picture, with such labels as *zuihitsu* 随筆, *kana zōshi* 仮名草子, and *haikai* 俳諧 applied to them variously by various scholars.

² Nakamura 1960, p. 330.

³ Yamagata 1979, Tsukagoshi 1984, Tezuka 1996.

And then there are the vulgar versions (or if you prefer as your translation for *zoku* “low, popular, and/or new” (Sarra), “unorthodox, radical, mixed” (Togasaki), or “parodic” (Mostow)).⁴ Some of them are explicitly named as such (the *Saikaku zoku tsurezure* 西鶴俗つれづれ ilk) and some merely seem likely to be deserving of the judgment, such as those that continue presently on the internet. In spite of the *zoku* in the titles, however, I find that the examples I will discuss are curiously nonparodic in force. Here is one sample of a recognizable Japanese classic translated into “Valley-speak,” which may pass here as a vulgar idiom:

The traffic on the freeways never ceases, yet the cars on it are never the same from one moment to the next. These cars drive on the stationery highways, and at the same time new cars exit and enter, but there are no cars that, like, stay on long. People’s houses are so totally like this.⁵

Is this a parody, or just a (somewhat inept) form of pastiche? Here we might say the writer has not gone quite far enough with the conceit to successfully (that is interestingly) deform the original.⁶ To my mind Mink, the translator, has not fulfilled Linda Hutcheon’s notion of a “structural superposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new,” which “the encoder, then the decoder” of a parody must work together to create.⁷ An admittedly small survey of *zokufications* of other works leads me to the same conclusion.⁸

Let us go back to the beginning with *Saikaku zoku tsurezure*, published posthumously in 1695. The first preface lays out the

⁴ Sarra 1997, p. v. Togasaki 1997, p. 89. Mostow 1997, p. 222.

⁵ Mink n.d. “Parody translations of classical Japanese literature.” At the risk of insulting your intelligence, the passage is of course the opening of Kamo no Chōmei’s 鴨長明 *Hōjōki* 方丈記, “An Account of My Hut,” 1212, one memorably rendered as “The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, not forming, are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings.” Keene 1955, p. 197.

⁶ It should be noted that attendees of the conference did not seem by and large to agree with me. Several defended this as an excellent parody, and many were amused. The translator, who identifies the style as Valley-speak, is known on the web only by the pseudonym “Mink,” and also offers a “ghetto style” *Tales of Ise*.

⁷ Hutcheon 1985, p. 33.

⁸ *Zoku makura no sōshi* 俗枕草紙 or *Senshōnagon* 僭上納言 of 1710, for example, imitates the style of Sei Shōnagon’s listing sections to comment on works of *haikai* poets, *ukiyo-zōshi* writers, playwrights, chanters, and actors of the day.

circumstances of writing—how the compiler could not bring himself to toss out remnants of Saikaku’s prose, and while imagining how the author had woven them together in idleness (the compiler, who is probably the publisher, cites choice phrases from Kenkō’s famous section 137), he had them carved on blocks to comfort himself. The compiler remarks that Saikaku was in no way inferior to the original monk, and thus he has stolen (*kasumetorite* かすめとりて) the title, calling it *Zoku tsurezuregusa* 俗つれづれぐさ.

An illustration shows a monk examining pages under lamplight as in the distance the moon spreads its pale rays over the waves and reeds of Naniwa. The location indicates Saikaku, but the hut and desk are coded for Kenkō, who wrote that the most pleasant of pastimes was to sit under the lamp with books open (section 13). The books that Kenkō touted were the classics of China and Japan, but perhaps here we are meant to see the very pages that we hold in our hands—pages that barely refer to the earlier work. There is reference frequently in the main text to Kenkō’s negative comments on drink, although Saikaku presents himself as less ambiguously in favor of sake; otherwise there is virtually no reliance on the older writing.

As it turns out, this is not a play on Kenkō’s text, rather it is an attempt to lean on the popularity of the classic in order to draw attention to contemporary pieces that someone wished to publish. Bibliographic evidence suggests the work did not sell terribly well even so, further disappointing a publisher who had not been pleased with sales for *Saikaku okimiyage* 西鶴置き土産 before that either.⁹

Almost 250 years later, Nagai Hyōsai 永井瓢齋 (1881–1945; for ten years the author of the *Asahi shinbun* column “Tensei jingo” 天声人語 or “Vox Populi, Vox Dei”) was inspired by the Saikaku version to attempt some “vulgar” variations. He cites as his first effort an early column he wrote in Kyoto under the heading *Zoku tsurezure* 俗徒然.¹⁰ He pens his own book-length *Zoku tsurezure* 俗つれづれ in 1934. The seriousness of this collection suggests that there was no intent to produce a parody. Nagai’s *Zoku tsurezure* is not a work that indulges in play at all (except perhaps on the covers, painted by Hyōsai himself, see Figure 1). Since he was a Zen monk and painter who went by the name Shaku Hyōsai 釈瓢齋, and even sported a Buddhist surplice or *kesa* 袈裟 at the office, one might think that he labels it *zoku* in contradistinction to his religious writings, such as his biography of the Zen master Hakuin oshō 白隠和尚

⁹ Asō and Fujii 1977, pp. 240–41.

¹⁰ Nagai 1934, p. 1.

(the only work of Nagai's currently in print).¹¹ But within the pages of *Zoku tsurezure* he takes up Kūkai 空海 (drawing on his own novel *Kōbō daishi* 弘法大師¹²), monk Ikkyū 一休, and various Buddhist concepts and phrases. He even begins by saying that he has no time to sit at the inkstone whiling away the hours in a leisurely mood. For this he blames the busyness of contemporary life.¹³ Writing is not his refuge.



Figure 1. Rear cover of *Zoku tsurezure*, 1934. Monkey, gourd, and catfish painting by Nagai Hyōsai. Collection of the author.

So why has he written a “zoku” *Tsurezuregusa*, if neither to play with the form nor to get in his digs at Kenkō? My finding is that our expectation of parody is misplaced. We have been duped, one might almost say, by the surface. I propose that a “vulgar” version of an earlier work is actually less likely to be a true parody, send up, or skewering than is a work that hides the relationship with a less obvious title. A work that does not signal its parodic register through *zoku* 俗 engages the reader in more surprising moments of recognition, whereas a *zoku*-

¹¹ Shaku Hyōsai 1935.

¹² Shaku Hyōsai 1934.

¹³ Nagai Hyōsai 1934, preface, n.p.

something does too much of the labor for us, inviting us to see correspondences everywhere (even where none exist). A *zoku* 俗/vulgar version not only sets the original title right before our eyes, it tempts our ears with the thought of a *zoku* 続/continuation, implying reverence for the model. That model may be constituted by this gesture as lacking in some way—in need of completion, as it were—but it is still named worthy of such attention. The skewering here is the inserting of a thread of connection, not (necessarily) the deflating action of a rapier. These *zoku* works indicate the exposure of readers to *Tsurezuregusa* through education. Their authors assume that readers will be familiar with the fourteenth century text, but have no particular desire to lower it.

For this reason I tend to think that the “vulgar” notes of idleness on the internet are not parodic either, for the most part. Some are spaces for haiku or photos.¹⁴ Most are spots for casual digressions.¹⁵ The author of an example such as “Nosutarujia no *tsurezuregusa* ノスタルジアの徒然草,” who pictures herself on her blog with a Yahoo Japan “avatar” (a manga-like “character” built by the individual subscriber, which blinks at intervals), quotes Kenkō’s preface and expresses the wish that her blog will “add spice to daily life” (*seikatsu no supaisu ni naretara*).¹⁶ That it may do, but it will probably not reach the level of bold play with the possibilities of the form. As far as my research has led me, vulgarity in the title does not make parody of the text.

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¹⁴ See *Zoku tsurezuregusa kodama kaeshi* 俗徒然草弔返し, entries posted beginning January of 2006 by Matsukaze_2006, identified as a male from Saitama. http://blog.goo.ne.jp/matukaze_2006/, viewed 15 August 2008.

¹⁵ See for example *Zoku ni iu “tsurezure naru” nan to yara . . .* 俗に言う『徒然なる』何とやら。 . . . , with entries posted beginning January 2007, <http://manakitu.blog90.fc2.com/>, viewed 20 November 2008.

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