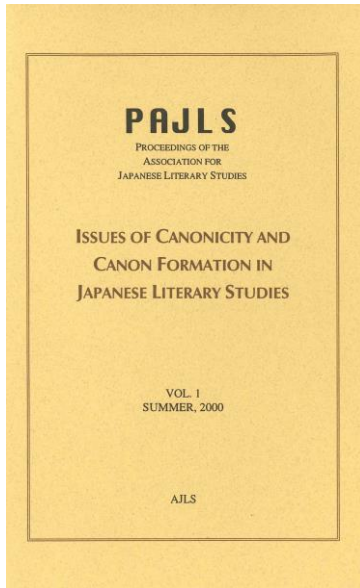


“Developing a *Rakugo* Canon and the Parodic Use of Canonical Texts in *Rakugo*”

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DEVELOPING A RAKUGO CANON AND THE PARODIC USE  
OF CANONICAL TEXTS IN RAKUGO

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*Rakugo* presents an interesting case study for the issue of canonicity in Japanese literary studies. In an apparent trick of smoke and mirrors, a non-literary, non-written performance art form has both assembled a canon of its own “master” works and engaged in an insightful parodic critique of the literary forms and works held dear in Japan, including, but not restricted to, imperial poetic anthologies, prose narratives and text collections, and dramatic art forms, such as *nō*, *kabuki* and *bunraku*. Still more strangely, by virtue of *rakugo*’s shifting location at the nexus between the modalities of literature and theater, the literati and the *vox populi*, and because of its immense—though ever-volatile—popularity following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, *rakugo* itself has contributed to the development of modern literary Japanese. Its traces are visible in works as diverse as Futabatei Shimei’s pioneering—though yet tentative—exploration of the inner psyche in *Ukigumo* (trans. *Floating Clouds*) and in Natsume Sōseki’s early comic novel *Wagahai ha neko de aru* (trans. *I am a Cat*), and others.<sup>1</sup> Despite this curious literary pedigree (or perhaps because of it), to most literary historians and

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Marleigh Ryan, *Ukigumo: Japan’s First Modern Novel* (1967), James Fujii, *Complicit Fictions: The Subject in the Modern Japanese Prose Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and Karatani Kojin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, trans. & edited by Brett de Bary (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); contrast Karatani Kojin; also Mizukawa Takao, *Sōseki to Rakugo* (Tokyo: Sairyūsha, 1986). While Ryan, Fujii, and Mizukawa approach the interplay between *rakugo* and the vernacular prose (*genbun itchi*) movement as fortuitous and beneficial to the eventual outcome of the vernacular project, Karatani, by contrast, sees the interplay more negatively, stating that the ability to write about landscape and the inner self escaped Futabatei when writing in Japanese, “when somehow the language of Shikitei Samba and other *kokkeibon* writers took possession of him” (40).

theorists, plebeian *rakugo* remains resolutely a marginal and unexpectedly resilient curiosity, perceived until recently, if considered at all, as largely unassimilable into the pedagogic imaginary of the Japanese literary canon. In this investigation concerning the relations between *rakugo* and issues of canonicity in Japanese literary studies, I will focus first on the internal practice of canon formation within *rakugo* and then take a brief look at *rakugo* performers' appropriation of the literary canon, showing this act to reflect performers' familiarity with the literary canon and an unstated understanding that enough of the audience would "get" the joke to warrant its utility. My intention, through this study, is to help shake the popular notion, which, though discredited again and again, continues to maintain that high culture and low culture inhabit separate universes and to show another area in which these two supposedly separate worlds interact.

In addressing the issue of canonicity, I must acknowledge my debt to John Guillory and his study of literary canon formation. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Guillory has demonstrated that canon formation is related to educational practices and the distribution of "cultural capital," which he defines as a specifically symbolic capital whose "production, exchange, distribution and consumption presupposes the division of society into groups that can be called classes" and whose exchange is occasioned largely through these educational institutions.<sup>2</sup> Literary canons, according to this argument, cannot be viewed simply as "the best of a culture," nor do they simply represent certain aesthetic concerns and moral values that can be found uniquely situated within works deemed canonical, but they are rather the physical manifestations of a political struggle over representation itself. By this light, canonical works, since they belong to the side that has "won," so to speak, reflect hegemonic viewpoints, and non-canonical works conversely reflect non-hegemonic, perhaps even subversive viewpoints. Guillory's argument leads him to the conclusion that "exploding the canon" to better reflect some notion of politically correct social diversity and multiculturalism is, at some levels, a misguided and utopian task, a tilting at windmills that is doomed to failure due to the very elasticity of the process of canon formation. For Guillory, rather, the crucial issue is the Marxist one, relating to the conditions of production—here the schools, their "social function and institutional protocols" (269) and their role in the

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<sup>2</sup> John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), viii.

preservation, reproduction and dissemination of literary works over time. Schools, Guillory maintains, control access to literacy and literary production, and thereby distribute cultural capital unequally, thus helping to reproduce existing inequitable social orders.<sup>3</sup>

Guillory's argument about the power of the schools holds true for contemporary Japan, where modern compulsory education, even with its stated meritocratic impulse, helps to reproduce clear social inequities between classes and genders. However, at the same time, this argument also obscures moments when there is not such a neat fit between the literary canon and educational processes, moments in Japan's not-so-distant past when the legalized separation of classes resulted in the simultaneous coexistence of multiple highly-regulated social orders, each with its own internal coherence and ways of reproducing this coherence. In other words, the existence of multiple social orders meant there was a potential for multiple overlapping canons.<sup>4</sup> This time was the Edo period and its immediate aftermath in the Meiji period, following the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

As is well known, the concentration of warriors in and around the city of Edo (and other castle towns) during the Edo period had unexpected consequences in the development of a service economy to provide for their

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<sup>3</sup> And, of course, as Melissa Wender has argued in her paper, "Admitting Resident Korean Writers into the *Bundan*," assimilation of works into a canon has a shadow effect of decontextualizing and depoliticizing the works previously considered non-canonical and, in the specific cases recounted in her article, seems to be linked somehow with historically-motivated Japanese attitudes toward Korea. This consideration holds for *rakugo* as well. Few contemporary spectators can readily grasp the daring subversiveness of late Edo *rakugo* performance text which mocked samurai excesses.

<sup>4</sup> The sheer existence of multiple overlapping canons within a single culture does not, I might add, actually disprove Guillory's argument about the power of educational institutions in how they help to maintain distributions of power; what it does do, however, is suggest that a similar sort of gatekeeping and canon formation might exist within the educational and/or quasi-educational structures of a particular culture's parallel and/or subordinate social cultures. Furthermore, my preliminary look at one of these alternate canons, the *rakugo* canon, shows that these supposedly unlettered *rakugo* performers had more than passing familiarity with so-called canonical works, suggesting greater interdependence and contact than might be imagined otherwise.

needs. Over time, the common classes came to have economic power quite out of keeping with their lowly status on the Confucian ladder which, in a brilliant attempt to legitimize institutionalized martial law, placed artisans and merchants in the lowest rank of both the legal and social pecking orders.<sup>5</sup> Legally, of course, these *chōnin* people (commoners) were subordinate to the ruling elite—the military aristocracy—and social and cultural exchange was expressly forbidden. However, exchange did occur, and gradually, as the merchant class became essential to the warrior elite, a vibrant merchant culture emerged, separate from the warrior culture. This culture was fueled economically by the wealth that was generated in providing goods and services for the large numbers of elite households and retainers residing in Edo; psychically it was fueled by a growing sense, among Edo townsmen in particular, that they possessed an intrinsically valued social identity in excess of the one provided them legally. By the eighteenth century, Edo was the seat of multiple cultural communities which reflected, on the one hand, the hegemonic practices and concerns of the samurai elite, and on the other, the non-hegemonic practices and concerns of the urban *chōnin*.

Deep within their separate world, the *chōnin*, surrounded and regulated by a political majority which simultaneously feared their economic power, envied their vitality and ingenuity, and disdained their lowly social status, had developed an aesthetic code based upon their identity as native children of Edo (*Edokko*), a code which valorized the concepts of *iki* and *tsū*. According to Nishiyama Matsunosuke, in his study of Edo popular culture, the defining characteristics of *tsū* were the myriad of ways to distinguish the “in-crowd” of the entertainment world from the mere upstart *parvenu* spectator. It referred to the elaborate codes of behavior and sensibilities which governed Edo subcultures. By contrast, *iki* referred not to codes but to the aesthetic consciousness that informed *tsū* behavior.<sup>6</sup> Informed by *iki* and *tsū*,

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<sup>5</sup> The concentration of warriors in Edo was another astute political move, here intended to demonstrate fealty but really to prevent samurai and rival *daimyō* from amassing any real political power in their own right.

<sup>6</sup> As Nishiyama Matsunosuke writes in *Edo Life: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600-1868* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), “The aesthetic consciousness of *iki* is part of the refined culture of sensation; *tsū* is this aesthetic consciousness put into practice. In other words, *tsū* is the behavior brought forth by *iki*” (58). Nishiyama's discussion of *iki* and *tsū* focuses mainly on the most refined levels of the aesthetic consciousness of *iki*, that of the pleasure quarters;

*Edokko* entertainment practices provided both spectators and practitioners a kind of carnivalesque escape from the dull reality of their everyday lives.

As the various entertainment practices of the seriously fun world of *iki* and *tsū* increased in number, each new practice sought to sustain its own existence in a culture that valued novelty and play. Most often this was through developing an internal hierarchy to protect its own interests, usually through the formation of artistic dynasties stemming from the creative (or blood) descendants of a particular artistic master. As similarly structured dynastic systems gained footing in each of the performing arts in turn, we can see, as well, the beginning of canon formation in each of these arts.

Professional *rakugo* emerged from these conditions, though its roots are far distant, in the medieval period, in the populist sermons of lay preachers and later the chroniclers of the great *daimyō* houses. Despite the quasi-religious impulse that lays at the source of *rakugo* storytelling,<sup>7</sup> it is a direct offspring of the institutional and social processes at work in Edo (soon to be renamed Tokyo) and other urban areas in the nineteenth century. In the very early years of the nineteenth century, however, when *yose rakugo* (performance hall *rakugo*) really got going, storytelling genres and techniques varied widely, as did the sources employed by storytellers to construct their tales. Many culled their material from older written sources, such as the *Konjaku monogatari shū* (early 12th century) and *Uji shūi monogatari* (early 13th century). Another popular source for material was the *Seisuishō* [Laughs to Discourage Sleep] of Anrakuan Sakuden, a master storyteller of the early years of the Edo period and long thought to be the “father of *rakugo*,” before Sekiyama Kazuo and others traced *rakugo*’s roots further back

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however, almost in passing, he mentions individuals unfortunate enough not to possess this aesthetic consciousness: these “boors” (*yabō*) and “phonies” (*hankatsū*)—Nishiyama’s terms—are frequent subjects in *rakugo* tales, thus showing that consciousness of the aesthetic had permeated the *chōnin* world, even as its actualization escaped many commoners, much as *Martha Stewart’s Living*, *Metropolitan Home*, and other “lifestyle” magazines provide voyeuristic visions into North America’s answer to *iki* and *tsū*.

<sup>7</sup> It is commonly believed that the dark kimono and shaven heads favored by Tokyo performers are a way of acknowledging *rakugo*’s religious roots, a combining, as it were, through costume, of the sacred and the profane.

in time.<sup>8</sup> (Nevertheless, many stories contained in excerpt form in *Seisuishō* are still performed today, which demonstrates their authoritative power as proto-canonical works.) Storytellers also utilized tales immortalized in *kabuki* or other elite entertainment practices. As a general rule, however, the storytellers had no canonical body of works that both restricted and shaped their creativity. They were relatively free to eschew all source *texts* and create original materials based on contemporary daily life or to alter older written materials as they saw fit, as long as the works they created did not flout the restrictive injunctions that periodically haunted *rakugo*. In contrast to *kabuki*, *yose* theaters were accessible and relatively inexpensive, and they featured evening shows in addition to daytime performances, permitting a more varied spectator base than many of the other *chōnin* entertainment practices that had emerged. The variety of storytelling forms found in a typical *rakugo* performance of the late Edo period varied considerably, but in general it provided the average *rakugo* spectator with a means to partake vicariously of more elite entertainment practices while enjoying an entertainment form that was directed specifically toward working-class interests and concerns. In this atmosphere, the number of storytelling theaters in Edo soared in just under two decades, from fifteen to well over a hundred in

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<sup>8</sup> For information on the history of oral performing arts, see Sekiyama Kazuo, "Wagei no rekishi" [A History of Narrative Arts] and other essays in *Yose: wagei no shūsei* [Yose: A Collection of Narrative Arts], ed. Geinōshi Kenkyūkai (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1971). This is volume 9 in the collection *Nihon no koten geinō* [Classical Japanese Performing Arts]. See also Hiruma Hisashi, "Edo wagei no seiritsu: Rakugo ni tsuite [The Establishment of Edo Narrative Arts: *Rakugo*], *Kokugo to kokubungaku* 6:34 (1957), Hiruma Hisashi, "Seiritsu ni okeru rakugo no shakaiteki kiban" [Social Foundations of *Rakugo* at the Time of its Formation], *Bungaku* 28 (1960), Heinz Morioka and Miyoko Sasaki, *Rakugo: The Popular Narrative Art of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Council on East Asian Studies, 1990), Nagai Hirō, "Edo no wagei" [Edo narrative arts] in *Yose: wagei no shūsei* [Yose: A Collection of Narrative Arts], Ed. Geinōshi Kenkyūkai (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1971), Okitsu Kaname, *Rakugo: Warai no nenrin* [*Rakugo*: The Yearly Rings of Laughter] (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1968), Sekine Mokuan, *Kōdan rakugo kō*, (Tokyo: Yūzankaku Shuppan, 1967, Sekiyama Kazuo, *Rakugo no seiritsu* [The Formation of *Rakugo*], *Kokubungaku: Kaishaku to kyōzai* 18:3 (1973c), Sasaki Miyoko and Heinz Morioka, "Rakugo: The Popular Narrative Art of the Grotesque," *HJAS* 41 (1981).

1823, when surveys estimated that every neighborhood in the city was home to at least one storytelling theater.

However, *chōnin* entertainment practices like *rakugo* were strictly regulated by the Tokugawa authorities, who strove to contain the vigor of the increasingly powerful *chōnin* people and keep them in their legally subordinate place. From the 1780s onward, first in response to widespread famine, numerous sumptuary laws were proclaimed which regulated consumption and social and entertainment practices. The language of these particular edicts, which came to be known as the Kansei reforms, reflected the very conservative moralistic stance of Neo-Confucianism and directly supported its ethical philosophy. Among the controls, the edicts forbade entertainers to dramatize current events (fearing insubordination) and exhorted them to perform only tales that espoused acceptable values, such as duty, honor, filial piety, and respect.

The new century did not immediately see the end of such government restrictions but rather revealed the government's redoubled efforts to maintain social control. In the decades before the Tokugawa *bakufu* gave up its losing battle against inevitable social change, a number of extremely draconian restrictions were leveled specifically at the *yose* theater and other narrative art forms through the Tempō Reforms (1841-1843). One edict forced the closure of all but fifteen of the hundreds of existing *yose* theaters, forbade the use of music, and limited storytellers to four types of stories: lectures on Shintoism, tales of practical Confucian ethics, war tales, and "instructive" tales of the past. Following the ouster of Mizuno Tadakuni in 1843, the Senior Councillor most responsible for the harsh edicts, the number of storytelling theaters in existence quickly surpassed the pre-injunction level.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, at this point in the Edo period, intense regulation and government restriction of popular entertainment practices could do little to contain the vibrant merchant culture, which encompassed not only the performing arts, but also visual art, music, and the nascent publishing industry. In its very diversity, merchant culture reflected the heterogeneity of its constituency, which ranged from wealthy financiers and their offspring, literati and

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<sup>9</sup> These edicts also forbade women to perform *jōruri* narration on the stage, a phenomenon that A. Kimi Coaldrake investigates in *Women's Gidayū and the Japanese Theater Tradition* (London and New York: Nissan Institute Routledge, 1997). The failure of these edicts demonstrates both the power of oral narrative arts in the Heian period and the increasing strength of the merchant classes (8).



artists, and mid-level artisans to day laborers and carpenters, a great number of whom had only recently relocated to the cities from the countryside. In the manner of subcultures the world over, Edo merchant culture survived and thrived by establishing internal codes of behavior within each individual entertainment practice, through the establishment of a community aesthetic and through its ability to maneuver around external governmental restrictions that sought to limit its influence.

*Rakugo* was no different. Like *kabuki*, and *nō*, *yose rakugo* soon organized itself along “family” lines. For *rakugo*, the process was as follows: initially, popular performers became known for their performance ability, and somewhat later for their ability to perform stories that became associated with them. This attracted enthusiastic fans who faithfully attended their favorite storytellers’ performances. The most popular types of story at this time were those that somehow found a way to shed light (and humor) on the contemporary social concerns of the *rakugo* performer. Out of this stable fan base emerged a number of apprentices who sought to learn the art of storytelling from their favorite performers in preparation for their own careers as storytellers. Once a fairly informal “pre-professional structure” where the roles of performer/creator and spectator tended to be relatively flexible and situationally based, the structure that emerged in the first decades of the nineteenth century was much more rigid. In this new structure, only those spectators who sought to become professionals crossed over into the performance space of the *yose* stage.

In the meantime, the most popular performers began to claim proprietary rights (of a sort) to the stories for which they were best known, consequently controlling the ability to transmit and perform oral non-written texts, whose flexible narrative cores, coming from literary and dramatic classics and story text collections, were well known in the society and often predated the advent of *yose rakugo* by centuries. Through this we see *rakugo* begin to assert itself as an *iegei* (house-based art) performing art.<sup>10</sup> While storytellers were still permitted and encouraged to create their own materials from the

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<sup>10</sup> Nishiyama uses this term to refer to the state that occurred in court music (*gagaku*) once certain hereditary houses began to claim proprietary performance rights to the textual material. To a lesser degree one can document a similar process in the *rakugo* houses on the way to the development of a *rakugo* canon, though the houses were never so tightly associated with hereditary succession.

master texts, the performance of these texts had begun to be claimed by particular dynastic lines.

In these two different negotiative acts, we see the first glimmering of a *rakugo* canon. On the one hand, this canon is defined negatively by Tada-kuni and other authorities, who sought through injunctions and restrictions to limit the form and content of *rakugo* to the four appropriate types of stories, as described above, and who had, at least theoretically, the authority and power to uphold their restrictions. Regarding this, records do indicate that at the height of the injunctions storytellers largely did adhere to the restrictive regulations, thus effectively diminishing the subversive subtext at the heart of many of the popular stories. On the other hand, the proto-*rakugo* canon is defined positively by the actual performers themselves through the very process where their oral narrative art developed both an institutional history and an internal hierarchy through the creation of the loosely organized *rakugo iemoto* system. In this latter activity we see the *rakugo* institution acting as both school and gatekeeper for the transmission of *rakugo* training and the authority to perform, in much the same way that more standard educational institutions control access to literacy, first and foremost, but also through their preservation, reproduction, and dissemination of literary works. Through "constituting and regulating" (Guillory) access to the cultural capital of *rakugo*, performers were also able to begin establishing a set of criteria that defined what they considered an aesthetically pleasing *rakugo*.

The next significant moment in the process of canon formation took place following the Meiji Restoration, in the 1880s and 1890s, during the second major *rakugo* "boom." Once again, we can see that the push toward canon formation was two-fold: On the one hand, we see the continuation of government intervention in popular entertainment practices, although now in the shape of an insecure new government trying to legitimize and perpetuate its existence in the face of fierce opposition. The new Meiji government continued to be suspicious of the potential inherent in popular entertainment in inciting unrest and in voicing opposition and enacted similarly restrictive legislation, as in the earlier period. Ironically, however, the means by which the Restoration government attempted to contain the popular entertainment industry simply replicated strategies identical to the pre-Restoration years. For example, Meiji storytellers were also exhorted to tell stories that promoted Confucian values and were forbidden to employ *kabuki* staging techniques on the *rakugo* stage as a means to promote the newly-restored imperial government. 1872 saw further attempts by the Meiji government to

appropriate the popularity of storytellers toward their own needs. Under the Moral Instruction Policy (*kyodo seisaku*), storytellers were officially categorized as a particular class of morals instructor, though situated, I might add, near the bottom of the scale, beneath teachers, educators, and *gesaku* writers. These active attempts to appropriate *rakugo* storytellers also contributed in some sense to the continuing formation of the *rakugo* canon by further delimiting appropriate subject matter and performance styles.<sup>11</sup>

However, rather than such external attempts to legislate content, the real push toward the canonization of *rakugo*, in the Meiji period as in the Edo period, to some extent, can only be considered internal, and it was a side effect of the very uncertain nature of the Meiji period itself. The new leaders of the Edo period embarked on a national program of modernization and Westernization. This modernization program touched all areas of Japanese society, industry, and government and created what could only be considered an age of opportunity for those able to adjust to the changed conditions and rapidly changing rules. In response to the perception that opportunities were to be found in Tokyo, the former city of Edo, people poured into the city, changing it as surely as they were changed by their exposure to urban life. At the same time, the new opportunities brought challenges that were met with varying degrees of success. Much literature of the period, and even later, reflects the tensions of that difficult time of intense transformation and commonly expresses some of the ambivalence people felt toward the changes that were sweeping the nation. In this era, as the old Confucian ways and the Edo lifestyle memorialized in *gesaku* literature began to give way under the combined pressures of “modernization” and “Westernization,” there began to develop a heightened sense of anxiety regarding change and a sense of nostalgia for the old days. In their own inimitable way, *rakugo* performers of the Meiji period had their finger on the pulse of society and were able to structure their textual adaptations around the immense changes and tensions of the day in a way which both amused and brought comfort to their audiences.

The textual state that resulted was strangely and paradoxically didactic. On one end of the continuum existed a type of text which promoted proper

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<sup>11</sup> In this year, the government approved the Education Order of 1872, one of many rescripts on education in the Meiji period. It established compulsory education and identified the function of schools as the training of nationalistic and moral individuals. In this order, storytellers were identified as a kind of lay morals instructors.

moral behavior, according to the precepts of the Moral Instruction Policy introduced above, or which showed in broad strokes the successes that were in store for the hard-working self-made man. In these texts, humor generally took a back seat. On the other end of the continuum existed texts whose *raison d'être* seemed simply to be the promotion of the acquisition of the "proper" standards of the Meiji-period *Edokko*, including the much-loved vices of gambling, wine, and women. Unlike their more dour counterparts on the other end of the continuum, performers of these sorts of texts consciously used humor to emphasize their point and to expand their audience base. Through much-loved tales such as "Chihayaburu" and "Kaen Daiko" (The Drum), boors, dullards, and know-it-alls were singled out and chastised for their inflexibility or for being non-authentic *Edokko*. The stories used both gentle and more pointed humor to express the bewilderment of individuals who are confronted with change in their daily life. Performance texts, for example, recounted such things as a former samurai's unsuccessful battle to subdue a tank of slippery eels on the grand opening night of his new *unagi* restaurant, or the strange encounter of hapless country dwellers with such newfangled things as trains, rickshaws, and the like.<sup>12</sup> Through their versions of the "tales of the city," Meiji period storytellers provided a kind of primer to the contemporary culture and practice of the city, while affording a means for the newly acculturated to laugh at their former, more naive selves. Many performers continued to perform texts based on *kabuki* plays (though the use of sets remained off limits), the classical text sources already mentioned, and literary and poetic sources such as *Heike monogatari* (trans. *The Tale of the Heike*), *Hyakunin issshu* (A Collection of One Hundred Poems, One Poem Each) and others. And following the boom in Western translation that began in the late 1870s and 1880s, storytellers began utilizing Western source texts as the basis for their *rakugo* narration (*hon'anmono*).<sup>13</sup> *Rakugo's* very open admissions policies made it possible

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<sup>12</sup> In the same manner that many contemporary rap songs are peppered with the names of consumer goods thought to denote status (for example, BMW automobiles, Abercrombie and Fitch clothing and Rolex watches), Meiji period *rakugo* stories dropped the names of the status emblems of their own age just as shamelessly, weaving narratives, or elements of narratives, around such things as Western food, bowler hats, folding cloth umbrellas, and snap-mouth purses.

<sup>13</sup> *Hon'anmono* were not translations *per se* since the source text underwent a two-stage transformation: Written texts were tailored for oral performance on the *rakugo*

for performers to introduce their working class audiences to modernistic ideals, modern consumer goods, and the literary forms that were commonly associated with the higher classes in a non-threatening manner.

While I fully recognize this social aspect of Meiji period *rakugo*, it remains the case that many Meiji period texts, despite containing these elements, defy easy categorization as instructive tools (whether didactically or humorously so). Rather, the texts exceed the sum of their transformations, which cannot be reduced either to staging difficulties, genre transformation difficulties, or (especially in the case of the *hon'anmono*) extensive revisions attributable to a need to efface seemingly insurmountable cultural differences. Take the performance text "Chihayaburu," for example, which was popularized in the 1895 by Kingoro Kosan and later published in *sokki* (transcription form) in *Hyakkaen*, a popular publication devoted to vernacular Japanese transcriptions of oral narratives.<sup>14</sup> At the heart of this tale lies a poem from the classical poetic collection entitled *Hyakunin Isshu* (A Collection of One Hundred Poems, One Poem Each):

Chihayaburu	Unheard of
kami-yo mo kikazu	Even in the legendary age
Tatsutagawa	of the awesome gods
kara-kurenai ni	The waters of Tatsuta river
mizu kuguru to wa	dyed in scarlet hues.
Ariwara no Narihira (825-880) <sup>15</sup>	

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stage in one part of the process, and the narrative material was made more accessible for the Japanese audience in the second. Thus they are best considered adaptations. For more information on this text type, see John Scott Miller, "Japanese oral narrative in a Meiji literary context" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton, 1988) which contains a lengthy discussion of this genre.

<sup>14</sup> Teruoka Yasutaka, Okitsu Kaname and Enomoto Shigetami, *Kōen sokki meiji taishō rakugo shūsei* [A Collection of Meiji Taishō *Rakugo*] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1972-1974), 133. A variant of "Chihayaburu" appeared around 1777. Until early last century it commonly went by the name of "Mugakusharon."

<sup>15</sup> Poem 17 of the *Hyakunin Isshu*. For a complete discussion of the literary and social function of this collection, see Joshua S. Mostow, *Pictures of the Heart: The Hyakunin Isshu in Word and Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996). The first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Kokinwakashū* (ca. 905), con-

The *rakugo* tale uses the classical poem ironically, as a device to parody certain modes of literary discourse, and clearly not to provide "equal access," so to speak, to the Japanese poetic tradition. In the *rakugo* tale, a neighborhood dullard asks the neighborhood know-it-all to explain the poem, which he clearly understands is a classic. Rather than admit ignorance, the self-proclaimed scholar performs a far-fetched textual exegesis that bears little or no resemblance to the poem itself.

In his line-by-line exegesis of the poem, the dunce (and spectator) learn of a tragic story of jilted love. Tatsutagawa, here a renowned sumo wrestler, not a river, returns to his hometown and takes over his parents' tofu shop after having been jilted (*furu/buru*) by his lover, Chihaya and her young protégé, Kamiyo (the line "*Kamiyo mo kikazu*" means "Kamiyo also does not listen"). Years later, Tatsutagawa and Chihaya meet again. The once famous courtesan is now down on her luck and begging for scraps (*kara*) outside his tofu shop. No happy tale of reunion ensues, for Tatsutagawa is unable to forgive Chihaya for her inconstancy. Ashamed, she walks away and throws herself (*kuguru*) into a well and drowns. The neighborhood dullard listens attentively to the self-proclaimed scholar's explanation and would seem to accept it but for the fact that the exegesis has failed to account for the final two syllables of the poem. He then asks what they mean, only to be informed, "Towa is the name given to Chihaya after her death."

The parody works, I would argue, because both audience and spectator are familiar with the poem itself and, at the very least, with the conventions of poetic exegesis and the familiar pose of a know-it-all who is unable to admit his ignorance. If this poem simply provided equal access to the Japanese literary classics, it would be necessary to provide more explicit acknowledgment of the poem's standard interpretation before engaging in parody, if parody would even be possible at all. The familiarity that the Meiji period performance text "*Chihayaburu*" assumes the spectator will have with certain Japanese poetic classics is what allows for the sly wink between performer and spectator and is but one example of how *rakugo* storytellers' performance texts, by commenting on the existence of a more

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tains this poem as poem number 294; in addition, there are three other poems starting with the word "Tatsutagawa" (283, 284, 314). In all of these poems, the prevailing image is of a river in autumn covered with a scarlet-hued brocade of fallen leaves. The translation here follows the *Kokinwakashū* interpretation.

standard literary canon in the creation of their own canon of performance works, can problematize that complex relationship between the transmission and reproduction of canonical texts.

Another factor that contributed to the eventual formation of a body of canonical *rakugo* texts throughout the later Meiji period was the cultural push for the new and the different. Those who were able or willing indulged in the numerous fads that swept the populous urban areas. John Whitney Hall writes that “Western ways for many became a compulsive fad, as Japanese avidly put on Western-style suits and hats, grew out their hair, sported watches and umbrellas, and learned to eat meat.”<sup>16</sup> Not all of the fads related to Western material culture by far. The popular performing arts underwent many changes during the latter part of the Meiji period after the authorities ceased enacting legislation intended to curb its influence. Finally free of conservative restrictions, and still largely free of an internally generated canon of works and performance conventions, *rakugo* performers experimented wildly with the form and content of their particular performance art. They experimented with the use of dance, musical accompaniment, elaborate sets, and live extras. Another innovation was that of lengthy serialized performances over the course of a week or more. Following completion of a series, some performers would then publish transcriptions of their performances, which often became popular bestsellers in their own right. Many of these innovations were quite popular, at least for a time, yet the old guard

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<sup>16</sup> John Whitney Hall, *Japan: From Prehistory to Modern Times* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, (1991 [1968]), 289. Moreover, popular woodblock prints from the Meiji period depict fashionable young men and women in their finest Western clothing, dancing, playing the piano, or otherwise enjoying the pleasures of modernity. While many of these prints were akin to advertisements or elements in the Meiji government’s modernization campaign, others revealed a more critical eye. For example, some Japanese artists made series of prints which asserted the superiority of some Japanese products or which suggested that the two modes could coexist in relative harmony. Certain Western artists—Georges Bigot, in particular—were less charitable toward the Japanese. Bigot’s *Toba-e* series lampooned the Meiji government’s façade of Westernization as superficial and inappropriate. While the satire contains an element of truth, many of the prints also show a racist bigotry. For more information on Meiji period prints and the modernization campaign, see Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986), particularly 111-99.

of *rakugo* performers looked disdainfully on those novelties, which substantially altered the appearance of *rakugo*. These established storytellers tended to have a rather conservative viewpoint of what *rakugo* storytelling entailed. This attitude, not surprisingly, encapsulated the aesthetic qualities and/or moral values of the performance styles that they themselves had popularized in the years when *rakugo* was only just maturing as a popular performing art. The celebrated performer San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900) is an example of one performer who experimented with elaborate forms only to settle on the simple style favored by *rakugo* performers of the present day: an empty stage and the simplest of props, namely the fan and hand towel. Enchō, further, publicly promoted this simple style over styles which seemed imitative of *kabuki*.<sup>17</sup> In other words, storytellers such as Enchō made "universal" aesthetic claims about *rakugo* from their vantage point within the *rakugo* performance dynasties, and that position of hegemony provided their voices with additional authority. Even so, many performers continued to experiment with the form and content of *rakugo* storytelling.

In the very early years of the nineteenth century, when it became clear that *rakugo* was beginning to lose ground to other modern entertainment practices, a number of master storytellers banded together as the first "*Rakugo kenkyū kai*" (*rakugo* research group) to establish joint guidelines and standards for contemporary *rakugo* performance. Their stated goal was to preserve both the "essence" of *rakugo* and some sense of the "essence" of the *Edokko*, or "child of Edo," both of which they perceived as slipping away in the face of continued modernization and social change. They sponsored "traditional" programs that consisted primarily of unadorned *rakugo* narration (*subanashi*), in sharp contrast to the then-popular vaudevillian variety shows, which might insert a few *rakugo* narrations between such popular entertainments as juggling, acrobatics, music, and paper lantern shows, to name but a few of the immense number of possible acts a show might contain.<sup>18</sup> The organization encouraged performers to focus on hu-

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<sup>17</sup> Sekiyama Kazuo, *Rakugo meijin den [Rakugo: Life of the Masters]* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1986), 209-53.

<sup>18</sup> For more information about the performing arts, see the collection *Nihon no koten geinō* (Classical Japanese Performing Arts), published by the Geinōshi Kenkyūkai (1971). See also Nishiyama Matsunosuke, *Edo Life: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600-1868* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), which contains a rich discussion of the variety of performing arts during the period.



morous tales, rather than on moralistic ones, and it also required sets to be presented as independent acts, in sharp contrast to the situation twenty years earlier, when serialized stories were encouraged for their ability to draw crowds. Finally, the already extant association of story with performance dynasty became more highly formalized, and storytellers began to assert their proprietary “right” to certain stories more frequently than ever before. Storytellers were still encouraged and expected to personalize the stories they told for each performance through the preface (*makura*) and in any added details, but the narrative and performance strategies of the original master were passed on and considered almost inseparable from the still somewhat flexible narrative core. As today, non-professionals faced few repercussions if they performed a favorite storyteller’s work without permission; however, professionals who did so risked censure from the performance dynasty that claimed quasi-proprietary rights.

Within just a few years, this first *rakugo* professional organization had proposed the first official canon of *rakugo* stories, in a handbook which summarized approximately 500 suitable stories. Over the last century, the number of stories considered part of the classical *rakugo* canon has swelled tremendously, to approximately 900 stories. The total number of tales is based on the number of titles found in the *Koten rakugo jiten*, which summarizes all of these tales, indicates textual origins, if any, and provides information about proprietary claims made of the stories. In the present day, the term *koten rakugo* (classical *rakugo*) refers to those works that are considered canonical, namely short works popularized in the nineteenth century which provide a humorous vision of the human condition.<sup>19</sup>

The gatekeeping strategies of professional guilds and performance dynasties have had a mixed effect on *rakugo*. On the one hand, their strategies helped to protect *rakugo* and enabled it to maintain its identity as a distinct narrative art form. Over time, this has contributed to the rise in the status of *rakugo* from the merely popular to the “traditional” and, conse-

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<sup>19</sup> Although *rakugo* performance texts are not written as scripts and then performed, there exist numerous text collections of popular stories. In addition, the Tokyo University Rakugo Club compiled a handbook of those *rakugo* stories considered *koten* or classical. The handbook contains brief summaries of the stories, information about performers, and information about variants and source texts, if known. Tōdai Rakugo Kai, *Zōhō rakugo jiten* [The *Rakugo* Dictionary, Enlarged Edition] (Tokyo: Seiabō, 1995 [1969]).

quently, by virtue of that, as something to be valued. Evidence of this can be seen in the following examples: frequently sold-out daily performances at the plush small hall of the National Theater of Japan suggest *rakugo*'s growing popularity as a traditional art form. And the 1995 naming of Yanagiya Kosan V (b. 1915) as a National Living Treasure, one of Japan's highest cultural honors, implies that *yose rakugo* now has a public status quite out of line with its original downtown roots. However, in discouraging performers from reworking new texts from the old in a way that would more dynamically filter classical source texts through the performers' personal experience and their understanding of current events, the gatekeepers have unwittingly loosened the bonds between performance text, context of production, and performance. It is in the interplay between these three elements that *rakugo* truly takes shape and provides meaning for contemporary audiences. As the gap between these three elements widens, many feel that *rakugo* has lost both its relevance to society and its critical or subversive potential, and in fact many potential spectators pass on *rakugo* in favor of other choices. I find it somewhat paradoxical that *rakugo*'s increasing social status has been accompanied by a sense (shared by some performers and spectators alike) that *rakugo* is an irrelevant and anachronistic holdover from earlier days.

Attempts to revitalize *rakugo* through innovation and through the promotion of a less restrictive canon have largely failed due to pressure from two fronts: from the academic institutions, which have recently begun to attempt to assimilate *rakugo* into Japan's pedagogic imaginary,<sup>20</sup> but mainly from the hierarchical gatekeeping institutions internal to *rakugo* which protect their interests through controlling access to *rakugo* "competency," texts, and performance venues. Needless to say, however, the persistence of the oral narrative arts in Japan makes it clear that long into the future oral performing artists will continue to make space for their art and make their art speak for and to the people of Japan. The question one must ask is, will the art that speaks be *rakugo*?

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<sup>20</sup> The clearest example of this is the growing number of academics both in and out of Japan whose work includes some attention to the links between *rakugo* and the cultural and literary history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.