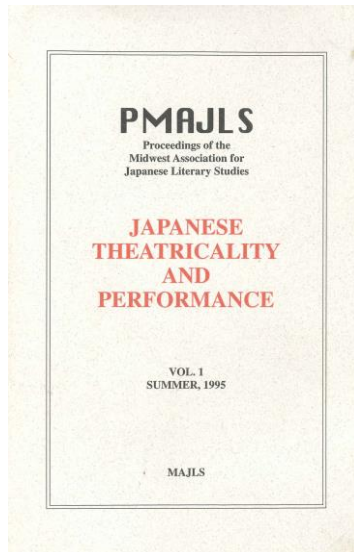


“Santō Kyōden’s *The Merchandise You All Know* as Merchandise: Self-reflexive Promotion Across Two Media”

Adam Kern 

Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies 1 (1995): 121–132.



PMAJLS 1:
Japanese Theatricality and Performance.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

**SANTŌ KYŌDEN'S *THE MERCHANDISE YOU*
ALL KNOW AS MERCHANDISE:
SELF-REFLEXIVE PROMOTION ACROSS
TWO MEDIA**

ADAM L. KERN
Harvard University

When studying the impact of the theatrical arts on a written text, scholars ideally should attend the actual performances. But those of us working at a remove of several centuries often find ourselves at the mercy of the script--if one exists. And so we conduct our research, thinking not in terms of the effect of the physical performance on a text but in scriptural terms. We emphasize dialogue. We identify the *sekai*, or “worlds” of historical characters in famous situations. We search for allusions to narrative passages. And we find it difficult to discuss those unscripted, more nebulous aspects of theatrical performance, such as when kabuki actors on stage refer to each other by their real names, rather than by the names of their characters. Without a thorough familiarity with such moments, we run the risk of missing much of what informs a theatrically-informed text.

This paper examines the ways in which an Edo-period author-illustrator, Santō Kyōden, appropriated for his texts a fairly intangible aspect of kabuki performance. Specifically, I will concentrate on how Kyōden capitalized on kabuki's use of self-reflexivity in one of his most famous works, a *kibyōshi*

called *Gozonji no shōbaimono* ("The Merchandise We All Know").¹

The *kibyōshi*, or "yellow-covered" book, is a genre of comic fiction for adults, imaginatively illustrated, usually running thirty pages in length. It was produced chiefly during the two quarter centuries sandwiching the year 1800. Kyōden, born in 1761 and died in 1816, made his debut as an author-illustrator of *kibyōshi* with *Gozonji no shōbaimono* in 1782. It became an immediate best-seller Ōta Nampō, one of the leading authors and critics of comic fiction, also accorded *Gozonji no shōbaimono* tremendous critical acclaim: in *Okame hachimoku* (Onlookers See It Better, 1782), his *kibyōshi hyōbanki*, or review book of contemporary *kibyōshi*, Nampō ranked Kyōden's piece as "the great *creme de la creme* of all works"--"*sō makijiku dai jō jō kichi*."²

No doubt part of the success of *Gozonji no shōbaimono* was due to the fact that it reflected the lives and activities of its readers--the *chōnin* or townsmen of Edo. The story is set in the Yoshiwara, that lavishly decorated den of pleasure frequented by the consummate sophisticate known as the *edokko*. The plot centers on the failed attempt of a group of playboy-wannabes from the *kamigata* or Kyōto-Ōsaka region to recoup their erstwhile popularity, which has been eclipsed by a gang of sophisticates from Edo.

¹ For other discussions of *Gozonji no shōbaimono* in English, see: Donald Keene, *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600-1867*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1978, p. 404; Haruko Iwasaki, *The World of Gesaku: Playful Writers of Late Eighteenth Century Japan*, Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1984; and Fumiko T. Togasaki, "A Form of Allusive Interaction: Obsession and the Obsessed One," in *Proceedings of the "Poetics of Japanese Literature: Midwest Seminar on the Teaching of Japanese Literature"*, Purdue University, October 1992, pp. 22-35. Translations are my own.

² Ikeda et. al., vol. I., p 216.

But *Gozonji no shōbaimono* also draws attention to itself as a *kibyōshi* vis-à-vis other genres of art and literature. What are depicted in the illustrations as human characters actually appear in the text as a pillar print (*hashira kakushi*), portrait print (*ichimai-zuri*), fashion book (*sharebon*), and so on. The leader of the *kamigata* gang is an *akabon*, or "red book," a kind of crudely sketched children's comic piece. The leader of the Edo genres--and thus the hero of the story--is a personification of the genre used to convey the story of *Gozonji no shōbaimono* itself. That is, the protagonist of Kyōden's *kibyōshi* is, in fact, himself a *kibyōshi*.³

This kind of "self-reflexive" move is an important feature of *Gozonji no shōbaimono*, if not many of Kyōden's other *kibyōshi*, and as such warrants careful attention.⁴ Self-reflexivity here signifies a deliberate marshaling of attention to the *medium* of the work, as opposed to its content. It is a purposeful reminder to the reader or audience of the work's status as a product, as a fictional work possessing its own materiality. This must not be misconstrued as self-referentiality, which denotes a mere reference to the narrator, usually by means of the personal pronoun. Self-reflexivity draws attention not so much to the narrator as to the author, not so much to the content, but to the medium itself.

Kyōden does not limit his use of self-reflexivity in *Gozonji no shōbaimono* to these two cases--to casting a *kibyōshi* as the protagonist of his *kibyōshi*, and to setting the *kibyōshi* genre

³ I have taken the liberty of using the term *kibyōshi* to refer to what Kyōden calls within the text of *Gozonji no shōbaimono* an *ahon* ("blue book"). The lines between genres at the time were fuzzy at best, and in the ensuing decades, *ahon* gradually acquired the retroactive term of *kibyōshi*.

⁴ For an insightful discussion of self-reflexivity, see Chapter Three, "Reflexive Subjects," in Scott Lash and John Ury, *Economics of Signs and Space*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994.

against genres from *kamigata*. He goes much further than that. To begin with, the story is set during the New Year, when *kibyōshi* were customarily published and sold. This reminds the reader of his recent purchase of a piece of comic fiction.

Second, Kyōden expounds on the qualities of successful *kibyōshi* authors and works in a light-hearted discussion among several of the personified genres of art and literature from Edo. This passage reads like one of the critiques in Nampo's *Okame hachimoku*. It begins with a characterization of Mr. Kibyōshi that is now the *locus classicus* of descriptions of the genre:

Kibyōshi always delights the eyes of his readers regardless of their social standing. He knows just how to flatter, is always stylishly composed, and displays a keen sense of insight into today's affairs. He possesses something of a poet's free-spirit, yet without one jot of imprudence. On long, drizzly afternoons, women and children love browsing through him almost as much as snacking on roasted beans. And Kibyōshi devotes himself to dreaming up new ideas for his next issue with every paper fiber of his being.⁵

Kyōden then continues, referring to contemporary genres, authors, and *kibyōshi* which would have been familiar to his readers:

One night, Kibyōshi threw a moon-viewing banquet. He invited Fashion Book, Pouch Book,

⁵ Ikeda et. at., p. 220.

Portrait Print,⁶ and all the other popular literary figures of the day, and conferred with them about novel ideas.

"The Very Different Treasure Ship⁷ was a tremendous success last year," Kibyōshi said.

"Zenkō's works are superb, indeed," agreed Fashion Book. "Kisanji's *Dreamers the Winners*⁸ went over quite well. Lately my own ideas have been so dreadfully blasé compared to theirs!"

"Koikawa's *A Gratuitous Account*⁹ was hilarious!" Portrait Print added. "Shiran's *Greasy Sweat*¹⁰ had its moments, too. Even Tsūshō and Kashō have come out with some nice pieces."¹¹

The third and most complex use of self-reflexivity in *Gozonji no shōb aimono* occurs in the introduction [See **Figure One** in Appendix]. The illustration here depicts an actor appearing before an audience to present the play's opening monologue, or *kōjō*. In the text immediately above the figure, however, the narrator introduces himself as an author of *kibyōs hi*. On one hand, this kind of playful discrepancy between text and illustration permeates the entire work; for, as we have seen, the different genres of books and woodblock prints mentioned in the text are personified in the

⁶ *Sharebon, fukuro-zashi*, and *ichimai-zuri*, respectively.

⁷ *Ōchigai takara bune*. A *kibyōshi* written by Shiba Zenkō (1750-1793) and illustrated by Kyōden (though under the pseudonyms of Kitao Masanobu) in 1781.

⁸ *Issui no yume*. A *kibyōshi* written by Hōseidō Kisanji (1735-1812) in 1781.

⁹ *Mudaiki*. A *kibyōshi* written by Koikawa Harumachi (1744-1789) ca. 1781.

¹⁰ *Aburatsūe*. A *sharebon* illustrated by Koikawa Harumachi in 1781.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-1.

illustrations. This sort of visual-verbal play is even considered to be one of the hallmarks of *kibyōshi*, and did not begin with Kyōden. Four years earlier, in 1778, Koikawa Harumachi published *Kotoba tatakai, atarashii no ne*, a *kibyōshi* in which the illustrations personified slang expressions.

On the other hand, there is another aspect to Kyōden's move of depicting the textual narrator as an actor in the illustrations. Even in works in which there is minimal or no discrepancy between characters as they appear in the text and in the illustrations, Kyōden's narrator may take the visual form of an actor. This is true of *Kagami no jōhari* (Enma's Crystal Ball, 1790) [Figure 2], *Rosei ga yume, sono zenjitsu* (Rosei's Dream, the Day Before, 1791) [Figure 3], and so forth. Why does Kyōden insist on making this move?

In the case of *Gozonji no shōbaimono*, there is something peculiar about the crests in the illustration of the actor [Figure 1]. Rather than the house insignia which actors customarily wore--the concentric squares of Ichikawa Danjūrō being a familiar example--the figure here is seen wearing the logos of famous Edo publishers: Okamura, Iwado-ya, Tsuru-ya, and others. Kyōden garbed his *kibyōshi* author in *kabuki* attire in order to use the convention of the house crest as a means of advertising the publishers of his *kibyōshi*.

And here we come to what is perhaps one of the most important homologies between *kabuki* and Kyōden's *kibyōshi*: self-reflexivity as kind of self-advertisement. *Kabuki*, of course, was no stranger to self-reflexive techniques. In *Audience and Actors*, Jacob Raz discusses several kinds of direct address, such as the *kōjō* or actor's prologue; monologic

asides to the audience known as *serifu*,¹² in which the leading actor promotes his house and acting style in punning language; and the frequent practice of actors on stage deliberately referring to themselves by their real names, rather than by the names of their characters. Raz suggests that these are ways of closing the gap between actor and audience, of reinforcing intimacy for the purpose of entertainment. "The Edo kabuki," he writes, "from its early stages was a place for theatrical parties, not a place to 'show dramas.'"¹³

Admittedly, such devices possess a ludic dimension inasmuch as they impart a playful admission of the differences between art and life. Yet what Raz and others have overlooked is the element of commercial promotion inherent in self-reflexivity. In the so-called "advertisement plays" (*kōkoku geki*) of kabuki, merchandise was advertised by weaving it into the very fabric of the story. This is an early instance of what advertising executives today term "product placement." When, for example, Ichikawa Danjūrō II delivered the impromptu prologue to *Wakamidori ikioi sogu* in 1718, he dressed as a vendor of an expectorant medicine (*uirō-uri*) and laced his speech with numerous puns advertising both the makers of the drug and the Ichikawa acting house.¹⁴

These "advertisement plays" continued through Kyōden's day, and their unscripted, self-reflexive techniques were available to him for use in his *kibyōshi*. All the self-reflexive

¹² Although generally meaning "dialogue", here I use the term *serifu* in its more specific sense. See Aubrey S. and Giovana M. Halford, *Kabuki Handbook*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1952, p. 458.

¹³ Raz, p. 188.

¹⁴ Danjūrō's impromptu, unscripted prologue apparently inspired such popularity that it was recorded in written form and survives to this day. See Matsumiya, pp. 149-151.

moments in *Gozonji no shōbaimono* are indeed strongly self-promoting: the publisher's trademarks on the actor's garb; the season of the actual publishing and selling of *kibyōshi*; the *kibyōshi* as sophisticated protagonist versus the *kamigata* genres as jealous, boorish rivals for the affections of a reading public; and the *hyōbanki*-like exposition of what makes a *kibyōshi* popular and thus profitable. All of these promote Kyōden as author-illustrator, Tsuru-ya as publisher, *kibyōshi* as genre, and *Gozonji no shōbaimono* as successful best-seller.

In conclusion, Santō Kyōden employed self-reflexive devices in *Gozonji no shōbaimono* not just for humorous effect, but also in order to peddle his *kibyōshi*. This was, in fact, nothing new: he was following a long line of *kōkoku geki*, or "advertisement plays," in which products were deliberately "placed" within the very fabric of the plays. Inasmuch as these advertisements were contained in visual dimensions of the kabuki play--such as house crests on an actor's robe--which today exist only in woodblock form, or in unscripted, impromptu prologues, Kyōden successfully applied a fairly intangible aspect of the physical performance of kabuki to his *kibyōshi*. In doing so, Kyōden was able to turn *Gozonji no shōbaimono* into a *shōbaimono*--"The Merchandise You All Know," into an advertisement for itself as a piece of literary merchandise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Koike Masatane et. al., *Edo no gesaku* [parodei] ehon, volume one, Shakai shishōsha, 1980.
 Matsumiya Saburō, *Edo kabuki to kōkoku*, Tōhō shobō, 1973.

Raz, Jacob, *Audience and Actors: A Study of Their Interaction in the Japanese Traditional Theater*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983.

Santō Kyōden, *Gozonji no shōb aimono*, 1782, Yamaguchi Takeshi, ed., *Kibyōshi nijūgoshū* in *Nihon meicho zenshū*, Nihon Meicho Zenshū Kankōkai, 1926.

Editor's Note

Figures one and two in this essay are reprinted with the permission of Shakai Shisōsha from *Edo no gesaku ehon*, © 1980 by Koike Masatane et al.

APPENDIX



FIGURE ONE. The Author appearing as narrator in actor's garb to deliver the opening monologue (*kojō*) of the *kibyōshi*, *Gozonji no shōbaimono*, in Koike et. al.



FIGURE TWO. The narrator appearing in actor's garb to deliver the opening monologue (*kōjō*) of the *kibyoshi*, *Kagami no jōhari*, in Koike et al.



FIGURE THREE. One of the characters delivering the play script to Rosei at the end of the *kibyoshi* so that Rosei's dream can begin. From *Rosei ga yume sono zenjitsu*, in Yamaguchi.