
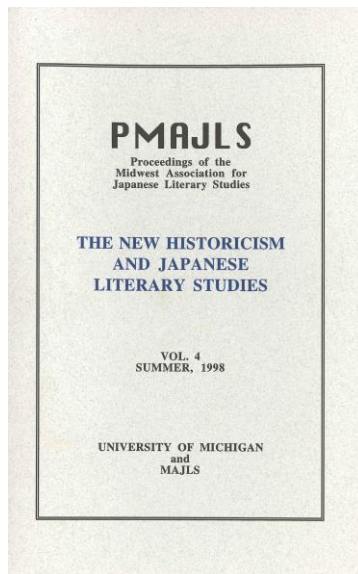


“Counter-Orientalism and Textual Play in Akutagawa’s ‘The Ball’ (Butōkai)”

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## Counter-Orientalism and Textual Play in Akutagawa's "The Ball" ("Butōkai")<sup>1</sup>

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Post-colonial theorists have debated whether a text produced by a colonial subject can resist the hegemonic discourse of an imperial power. The question, articulated provocatively by Gayatri Spivak,<sup>2</sup> was whether by engaging with the colonial institution, necessarily arguing on its terms, the colonial subject was not already defined and coopted by it.

A text produced by a colonial subject that responds explicitly to one produced from within the colonial power structure is a useful venue for thinking about the possibilities of literary resistance. The canonical example in Western literature of this sort of "writing back" is Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* that seeks, in Rhys' words, to "write a life" for the mad Creole wife Mr. Rochester kept imprisoned in his attic.<sup>3</sup>

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's short story "Butōkai" (The Ball, 1920), offers an example of literary resistance to an imperial text in the Japanese context. Akutagawa rewrites "A Ball in Edo," an

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<sup>1</sup> This essay has benefited from comments on the original conference paper from John Timothy Wixted, Brett DeBary, Mizumura Minae, and Leslie Pincus.

<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 24-28.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gayatri Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in Fred Botting, ed., *Frankenstein/Mary Shelley* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 242.

1887 travel memoir by the French writer Pierre Loti, which sarcastically described his impressions of a ball at the Rokumeikan, the state hall in Tokyo where social events were held for foreign dignitaries. Akutagawa describes the ball from the point of view of a young woman named Akiko, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a member of the new Meiji elite. The Japanese text retells and manipulates many of the incidents and comments of Loti's text. Much as Rhys does, Akutagawa inscribes his resistant subject within the discursive space delimited by the earlier, colonizing text, seeking to wrest control of that space, and of the representation of that historical moment, from the voice of the imperial subject. Without any overt criticism of the earlier text, Akutagawa's manipulation of it implicitly demonstrates his resentment of its cultural chauvinism.

To read Akutagawa in this way as a politically engaged writer is to go against the grain of conventional Japanese scholarship. The standard depiction of Akutagawa is as a literary craftsman, devoted to art for art's sake, an aesthete concerned with style and artifice above all. His extensive use of other texts, borrowing plots and images, referring to and citing earlier works, is read in the context of this intellectual gamesmanship. Indeed, his fascination with the dynamic of intertextuality and the possibilities for textual playfulness is manifested in many of his stories. Some, such as "Imogayu" (Yam gruel, 1916), and "Yabu no naka" (In a grove, 1922), draw on the *Konjaku monogatari* and other premodern Japanese sources. Other Akutagawa works retell or cite elements of foreign texts, both modern and historic, ranging from *The Brothers Karamazov* to works of religious history.<sup>4</sup> Akutagawa's bricolage could be mischievous: in his short story

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1984), 565.

"Hokyōnin no shi" (Death of a martyr, 1918), he cited as his source a work of Christian history printed in Nagasaki, describing its contents and physical characteristics in great detail. Only later, after contemporary Christian scholars expressed their interest in examining the volume, did he admit that the "source" was a hoax.<sup>5</sup> Akutagawa staked out his position in regard to other texts more explicitly than most writers, as his to read and misread as he liked. He also claimed the right to disregard the "facts" of history, and to reshuffle and reshape them as he wanted. This is revealed both in his highly eclectic use and manufacture of sources, and in his subversion of the reliability of his narrators, as in "Yabu no naka," (the primary source for the 1950 Kurosawa film "Rashomon").

Yet this fascination with the instability of texts did not lead in Akutagawa's work only to aesthetic artifice. In such works as "Butōkai," he was clearly deploying these literary techniques to articulate a strongly felt political sensibility, particularly in regard to the issue of Western cultural imperialism in Japan. A number of his period pieces suggest a powerful resentment of Western delimitations and representations of Japanese cultural space. Texts such as "Kamigami no bishō [Smile of the gods, 1922]," set in sixteenth-century Nagasaki, and "The Ball" articulate a position of resistance to and criticism of the imperialist presence.

The French account of the ball at the Rokumeikan begins with the delivery of an invitation "engraved in French, on an elegant card with gilded edges"<sup>6</sup> to a ball in honor of the 34th birthday of the Meiji Emperor, given by "la comtesse Sodeska." Loti found

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<sup>5</sup> Notes to Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Butōkai," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke shū*, *Nihon kindai bungaku taikai* (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 1970), 465, note 50. Translation mine. All further references in text.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Loti, "Un Bal à Yeddo," *Japoneries d'Automne* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 34th ed., 1910), 77. Translation mine. All further references in text.

the use of the French title by this Japanese aristocrat amusing and somewhat presumptuous. He cited it as an example of the affected way in which the upper-class Japanese he had met on his tour of the country tried to imitate European society. Although he recognized that "it would be necessary to go much farther back than our crusades to find the origins of their nobility"(78), he still found the use of the European-style title pretentious, and he missed few opportunities in his story to poke fun at his Japanese hosts, who wore western costumes at their ball as they danced waltzes and mazurkas to music played by foreign musicians.

Akutagawa's response to Loti's work is comprised of two sections. The first, longer part describes Akiko's experience of the ball, which takes place on November 3, 1886. Akiko arrives, escorted by her father, and is immediately gratified by the response she evokes from various men as she enters the ballroom. The French naval officer approaches her and asks her to dance, and they spend the evening together. After dancing and some ice cream, they go out on the balcony to watch the fireworks at the end of the evening.

The second part of the story takes place, we are told, in the autumn of 1919. "The Akiko of that time," now a wealthy married woman, is taking the train from Tokyo to her vacation home in Kamakura, when she meets an acquaintance, a young writer. Upon seeing some chrysanthemums he is carrying, she remarks that the flower always reminds her of her experience at the ball, and she tells the young writer "in detail" about her experience. Interested in the story, the young writer idly asks her if she knew the French officer's name. "Indeed I do. His name was Julien Viaud," Akiko, now identified as "Mrs. H.," replies.

'Then it was Loti, wasn't it? It was Pierre Loti, who wrote *Madame Chrysanthème*.'

The young man was quite excited. But Mrs. H., gazing at

the young man with an odd expression, kept murmuring only, 'No, it was not this Mr. Loti. It was Julien Viaud.' (188)

Based on this narrative structure, we can assume that the first part of the story is the account of the experience that Mrs. H. relates to the young writer in the train to Kamakura. We can even conjecture that the first section is Mrs. H.'s memory as transcribed by the young writer. This is suggested by the literary tone of the descriptions, and by comments indicating knowledge on the part of the narrator that is not possessed by Akiko. (Whether the narrator is the young writer or a purely undramatized voice, however, affects neither the first part of the story nor the argument of this essay).

Although Loti's essay may seem trivial or frivolous, it possesses many of the defining elements of the discursive practice Edward Said calls Orientalism. Said describes how European intellectual and cultural discourse on the Orient accompanied and justified the enterprise of European imperialism.<sup>7</sup> According to Said's formulation, the various literary and academic portrayals of Asian and African cultures that make up the discourse of Orientalism end up revealing as much about the creators of the discourse as about its objects. Said writes:

[T]he imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Said, 8.

Of course, simply because the object of this original Orientalism was as much imagined as empirical did not mean that the residents of the real Orient could ignore it. Even after the institutions of European imperialism were dissolved, cultures in Asia and other parts of the world that had been the victims of European imperialism would have to grapple with its legacy.

Japan was never colonized, but beginning with the forced opening of the country to Western trade in 1852, the military threat of the imperial powers was always an explicit motivation for Japan's modernization. As Akutagawa knew, the purpose of the *Rokumeikan* itself was to help Japan avoid the fate of its colonized neighbors. The balls given for foreigners were meant to demonstrate that Japan belonged to the community of advanced nations, and to speed the removal of the unequal treaties imposed by the imperial powers. The ball described in the two stories was part of a conscious strategy of resistance to colonial power, and the subtext of Loti's condescending account is a brusque rejection of these aims.

Akutagawa's response to Loti's text is sensitive to these real-world political issues. It is no coincidence that the Loti character is identified throughout "The Ball" as "the French naval officer" (*furansu no kaigun shōshō*). Wearing the uniform of the armed forces of one of the Western powers, the French officer is a walking symbol of the threat of imperialism. But just as we read Loti's text as speaking from within the imperial enterprise, we must consider the position of the Japanese response as well; what sort of Japan was Akutagawa writing for in 1920? In contrast to its situation during the days of the *Rokumeikan*, Japan was now itself a budding imperial power, having colonized Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910. Its victory over Russia in 1905 made it the first Asian nation to defeat a European one in a war, and in 1920, Japan joined the League of Nations, and would be recognized at

the Washington Conference in the following year as a significant international naval power. Akutagawa's text speaks from both these Japans: colonizer as well as potentially colonized, military victor as well as victim. Akutagawa's resistance to Loti's Orientalist text is composed with knowledge of both the sense of threat and urgency of the Rokumeikan period and the newfound swagger of the post-World War I period. In its gentle mocking of the naiveté of the Rokumeikan period, "The Ball" perhaps prefigures the shift in the Japanese cultural imagination in the 1920s from cosmopolitanism to the more narrow, nationalistic "culturalism" (*bunkashugi*) that Tetsuo Najita and H. D. Harootunian have described.<sup>9</sup>

Loti's discourse was, of course, written with an audience of Europeans in mind, but at the close of his account, Loti imagined a possible audience of future Japanese readers:

All in all, a gay and charming evening, that the Japanese offered us with much good grace. If I have smiled from time to time, it was without malice. When I think that those costumes, those manners, the ceremony, the dances, were things learned, learned very quickly, learned by imperial order and perhaps against their will, I say to myself that these people are truly marvelous imitators, and such an affair seems to me one of the most interesting achievements of this people, who are unrivaled in feats of dexterity. It has amused me to note, without any ill intention, all these details, which I guarantee are as faithful as a photograph before retouching. In this country, which is transforming itself so remarkably quickly, it will perhaps also amuse the Japanese themselves, when several years have passed, to find described here this stage of their evolution, to read what occurred at this ball

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<sup>9</sup> Tetsuo Najita and H.D. Harootunian, "Japanese Revolt Against the West: Political and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century," in Peter Duus, ed., *Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 711-74.



decorated with chrysanthemums, given at the Rokumeikan on the anniversary of the birth of his Majesty the Emperor Mutsuhito, in the year of our Lord 1886. (105-6)

Clearly, the effort of recognizing this second possible audience caused Loti to reflect that his comments might not be taken by their objects with complete equanimity; thus his pains to assure his readers that his remarks were made "without malice" or "ill intention." But despite this slight equivocation, the implication of this concluding passage to "A Ball in Edo" was that the Japanese were on a course of modernization that would inevitably bring them, at some point, to the level of sophistication (that is to say, Westernization) of Loti and his compatriots. A writer as sensitive to the possibilities of intertextual dialogue as Akutagawa could hardly have resisted the invitation that Loti's comments extended. The condescending attitude and unquestioned assumption of superiority that permeates Loti's text were not surprising given the period in which it was produced; but it was not with "amusement," but with clear resentment that Akutagawa responded to the French writer's work.

It is no coincidence that Loti hardly mentions any Japanese men in his text. As Said explains, it is a characteristic tendency in Orientalist travel writing to represent the Asian culture being described as essentially female, and thereby vulnerable to the dominating presence of a Western male observer. The Orientalist attitude, he writes, is always based on "the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability." (206) The power of the imperialistic Western presence is commonly expressed in terms of a male-female interaction; in effect, Loti only sees Japanese women at the ball, because they can be represented most conveniently in the subordinate position in which the Orientalist discourse sees all "Orientals." Loti's most

famous work on Japan was a novel, *Madame Chrysanthemum*, in which the Western narrator seduces and then happily abandons a Japanese woman. In "A Ball in Edo," Loti not only ignores, but explicitly tells us that he had no interest in the Japanese men there. The women he finds charming but indistinguishable:

But how would I recognize them, tell the Misses Arimaska from the Misses Karakamoko, and the Karakamokos from the Kounitchiwas, when it was time to come to them, at the first measures of the promised dance? This worried me greatly, that they all resembled each other so; certainly I would shortly be very embarrassed among this uniformity of appearance.... (94)

Loti locates the general faults he identifies as typically Japanese -- lack of individuality, naive imitation of Westerners -- specifically in Japanese women. Focusing on the women to point out a trait generalizable to Japanese of both genders, he writes,

They danced very correctly, my Japanese women in Parisian robes. But one felt that this was a *learned* thing, that they acted as robots, without the least bit of personal initiative. If by chance the rhythm was lost, it was necessary to stop and begin again; of themselves, they could never make up for it, and would continue to dance out of time. (94)

Loti's discussion nominally ignores the male Japanese, but in fact he is using the women as surrogates for the nation as a whole. He comments again in his concluding remarks that the Japanese as a nation (not merely the women) have "learned" their Western manners. The women, the focus of Loti's sexual attention, are at the same time metaphorized into representatives of their nation -- and in both cases, objectified.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, Loti's text is dedicated to a Western woman -- (*À Madame Alphonse Daudet*) -- perhaps to emphasize his awareness of socially appropriate objects of sexual attention.

By focalizing his story in the young woman, Akiko, Akutagawa was responding to this implicit metaphorical gender relationship. He counters Loti's dismissal by endowing one of those very Japanese women with a lively subjectivity. Although Akiko is on one level a device for redescribing the things and people that Loti has described, she is also portrayed as an active observer, who takes real sensual pleasure in the environment of the ball, and explicitly and implicitly challenges Loti's estimations of the evening. Thus, while Loti writes sourly of the Rokumeikan, the brand-new and spectacularly expensive new hall, that it was "hardly elegant. . . . Built in the European style, all fresh, white, and new, it resembled. . . a casino in one of our second-rate resort towns,"(85) Akiko, on the other hand, is entranced as she walks up its broad steps, banked with tiers of different-colored chrysanthemums: "Where the border of chrysanthemums ended, from the ballroom at the top of the stairs the gay sound of the orchestra was already flowing without pause, like a sigh of inexpressible happiness."(181)

Akutagawa goes on to respond to many of the passages in Loti's text with carefully recastings revisions that make clear his sensitivity to the political implications of Loti's memoir. For example, where Loti expresses his admiration of the Chinese diplomats at the ball, with an invidious comparison to the Japanese, Akutagawa presents a Chinese guest as not only physically inferior to the Japanese, but subject to the bewitching allure of Akiko's presence. Loti notes that rather than attempting to adopt Western styles, the Chinese have retained their traditional forms of dress:

At ten o'clock, the party of the Chinese Ambassador arrived. From among the swarms of dwarfish Japanese, the heads of this haughty band of a dozen protruded with disdainful looks on their faces; these Chinese, men from a superior race of the north, possessed, in the way they walked, and in their

fine silks, a noble grace. They displayed as well a splendid dignity and taste. They adhered strictly to their traditional robes, their finely embroidered jackets, their coarse, pendulous beards and their queues . . . (89)

In Akutagawa's story, however, a Chinese diplomat cuts quite a different figure. Not only is he not physically attractive, as in Loti's description, but he is far from disdainful of the Japanese around him, as demonstrated by his response to Akiko:

As the official turned his corpulent body sideways to let the two pass, he cast a stunned gaze toward Akiko. Her innocent rose-colored ball gown, a sky-blue ribbon elegantly circling her neck, and the single rose scenting her dark hair -- truly that night Akiko's appearance, bound to amaze the eyes of that Chinese official with his long queue, presented to perfection the beauty of the young women of Japan's enlightenment. (182)

Akutagawa's text has reversed various key elements of Loti's description in order to communicate both Akiko's consciousness of her effect on male viewers, and the quite different attitude of the Chinese diplomat. As in Loti's text, the Chinese official's queue is mentioned, but here it is not given any particular approbation. Rather than being too proud to take notice of a Japanese, here the Chinese is overcome by what the narrator represents as the concentrated essence of Japanese enlightenment. The passage that in Loti's text emphasized the short stature and lack of elegance of the Japanese in their Western clothes is transmuted by Akutagawa into a description of a physical allure that is quite directly linked to Japan's cultural and political accomplishments.

Similarly, both texts describe the decorations of the ballroom in quite extensive detail, but to Loti the various flags and flower arrangements have a tawdry, clumsy effect, while to Akiko they

seem grand and sophisticated. Loti observes the mixture of Japanese and Western decorations and remarks:

The walls were draped with the imperial purple crepe with large white heraldic chrysanthemums, or yellow and green Chinese banners with horrible dragons... These hangings contrasted with the banality of venetian lanterns and all sorts of gewgaws hanging from the ceiling, giving the feeling of a China or a Japan on a spree, like yokels at a village fair. (88)

Akiko merely observes, as she is whirling around the dance floor, the Chinese and Japanese banners hanging on the walls: "the purple crepe banners with the imperial crest in relief, and the Chinese national flag with a undulating blue dragon with bared talons." (183) The national banners are not explicitly evaluated, but are portrayed as merely one element of the dazzling overall effect of the decorations in the ball room. They are by no means demeaning or unflattering to Japan's national image, as Loti describes them; if anything, they function as an assertion of Asian national identity within the Western-inspired space of the Rokumeikan.

Similarly, Akutagawa rewrites Loti's view of Akiko herself. In the French text, Akiko is grudgingly described as equivalent in poise to a provincial young French woman, but Loti goes on to imagine her shedding her western pretensions and transforming into her true, exotic self, clad in kimono, worshipping native gods, and eating rice with chopsticks:

In fact, she wore a gown as well as any young French woman of marriageable age (at least, to be honest, a rather countrified one from a region such as Carpenteras or Landerneau), and could skillfully eat ice cream with a spoon, holding it firmly with the tips of her gloved fingers. Yet shortly she would return to the paper walls of her own home, and like all the other women, take off her tapered corset, put on her kimono embroidered with a stork or some other such common bird, and

kneeling, intone her prayers to the Shinto or Buddhist gods,  
and then using her chopsticks, eat her rice from a bowl....  
(102)

Akutagawa's version repeats the essential characteristics of this speculation, yet with a crucial difference: Akiko is confident that the French officer believes her to be different from the other Japanese women:

She understood that this foreigner, unused to Japan, was fascinated by her lively dancing style. Could this beautiful girl really live like a doll in a paper and bamboo house? And then with thin metal chopsticks, from a bowl the size of her hand painted with blue flowers, pluck rice grains for her dinner? In his eyes these sorts of questions seemed to come and go with an amiable smile. To Akiko, this was both amusing and a source of pride.... (184)

Loti, writing in 1887, wrote with the utter self-assuredness of the white European who simply had no need of finding out what the "Orientals" around him were actually thinking. Akiko is aware that the French naval officer is evaluating the difference between them, but with a perhaps slightly naive self-confidence, assumes that his evaluation is bound to be complimentary.

On the level of language, as well, Akutagawa reverses Loti's discursive practices. One of the features of Loti's commentary is the appropriation of various Japanese words to humorous effect. Thus, as in some examples quoted above, he "names" people with random bits of traveler's Japanese -- "Countess Is-that-so" (*Comtesse Sodeska*), "Miss Is-there-any (*la demoiselle Arimaska*), "Marquess There-is-none" (*la Marquise Arimasen*) -- as if to portray Japanese culture as an indistinguishable mix of exotica, which need not be identified except as generically "Japanese" with an arbitrarily selected handful of foreign-sounding syllables. (Loti asserts in a footnote that he has changed

all the names, except that of the Emperor, "in order not to injure anyone."(106)) Similarly, he discusses his use of Japanese at the ball:

In order to bring myself to the proper standard, I tried to use the elegant forms and honorific conjugations of *degosarimas*. (For persons of good manners, it is the practice, among other affectations, to intersperse *degosarimas* in the middle of each verb, after the root and before the inflection; this results in an effect far more pompous than our miserable subjunctive imperfect in French.) And here, naturally, one heard this *degosarimas* everywhere; it was the dominant feature of these extraordinarily polite conversations that droned on through the ball....(96)

To say the least, Loti's grasp of Japanese grammar is uncertain. But armed with the ineffable confidence of the European amid Orientals, he makes the Japanese conversations around him into part of the local color. He attempts to speak some Japanese, and notes that his "favorite dancing partner," the one on whom Akiko is based -- whom Loti recalls as "A Miss Miogonitchi or Karakamoko, I don't remember which" (96) -- "understood very well what I said, and with a charming smile rising to her lips, would correct me every time I made a mistake."(97)

In the Akutagawa text, both Akiko and the narrator incorporate French words into their discourse, demonstrating their ability, like Loti's, to appropriate the language of the other. For her part, Akiko has studied French (as well as ballroom dancing) as part of her education as a young woman of the Meiji elite. Thus when she notices Loti's "strangely accented Japanese," (*iyōna akusan o obita nihongo*) (183) the word "accent" is written (in *katakana*) according to the French pronunciation ("*akusan*"), rather than the English pronunciation ("*akusento*"), as the word would normally be rendered in Japanese. Similarly, champagne is pronounced "*shanpanyu*" rather than the conventional "*shanpan*,"

and waltz is pronounced "*barusu*" (following the French word "*valse*") rather than "*warutsu*." (183) All of these words occur in the narrative portrayal of Akiko's consciousness, rather than her directly quoted speech or thoughts, but in the scenes of conversation between her and Loti, they speak French, not, as Loti describes in his account, Japanese. In both stories, using the language of the foreigner becomes a sign of mastery over the other culture (or at least, in Akutagawa's text, a sign of equality).

The short second part of "*Butōkai*," in which Akiko, now Mrs. H., insists that the Frenchman she met at the ball was Julien Viaud and not Pierre Loti, is a final example of Akutagawa's reversal and subversion of Loti's text. In effect, Akiko denies Loti the autonomy of his existence outside her experience. Just as Loti, in his account, did not name the Japanese he met at the ball, calling them instead by random Japanese words and phrases he had picked up during his travels, Akiko claims control of the identities of the characters in her own "text." The Orientalist writer, whose enterprise was to fix the objects of his writing within his discursive control, is on the contrary captured and fixed within the representation of one of his own "creations."

Of course, any "post-Orientalist" or "post-colonial" statement about the relationship between Western imperialism and Eastern imperialized culture is inevitably produced in light of the colonial interaction that has already taken place. As one observer of the debate on post-colonial discourse observes,

Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridized. . . Since it is not possible to create or recreate national or regional formations wholly independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise, it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds; to investigate the means by which



Europe imposed and maintained its codes."<sup>11</sup>

Akutagawa's text, too, displays this "hybridized" subjectivity, which results in a complication of the basic France - Japan (Imperialist power - potential colony) opposition. Although I will not go into these topics in detail in this paper, I want to call attention to their presence in "The Ball." First, the representation of China and the Chinese at the ball evoke Japan's twentieth-century colonial designs on the Asian continent, suggesting a "Japanese Orientalism" that both in terms of cultural representation and military subjugation replicated the Western enterprise. Akutagawa wrote from a nation that in its Twenty-One Demands to China in 1915 had made its imperialistic intentions clear. His placement of the Chinese character in a subordinate position to his Japanese protagonist reverberates with this implied political relationship. Yet even in 1920 Japan's self-image as imperial power was vulnerable; the embarrassing rejection of Japan's demand for a statement of racial equality among nations at the Versailles Conference had reminded the Japanese that they were still limited by such hierarchies.

Second, Akiko's consciousness of the other women at the ball reproduces to a certain extent the condescending attitude of Loti's text. If in the passages cited earlier she seemed to be functioning as a symbol of her nation, here she is looking with a foreigner's eye at the failings of her compatriots. Recapitulating Loti's comments about the uniformity of Japanese women, Akiko is struck by the similarity of the women her age at the ball: "They all wore the same sort of light-blue or rose-colored ball gowns..." (182) And although she is pleased to see that even the host of the ball, the unnamed count (modeled on the actual host of the ball

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Tiffin, "Post-colonial Literature and Counter-discourse," in Ashcroft et al., 95.

Loti attended, then-Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru<sup>12</sup>) seems susceptible to her charms, Akiko cannot help feeling that his wife's face betrays "a certain touch of vulgarity." (182) Akiko's thoughts seem to be echoing Loti's comments about the lack of sophistication of Japanese women at the ball. Perhaps here we can see the ambivalence of a Japanese of Akutagawa's time, somewhat embarrassed by the awkward efforts of Meiji Japanese to reproduce Western customs and institutions.

Finally, the narrative structure of Akutagawa's text, in which a narrator -- presumably the "young writer" of the epilogue -- describes Akiko's experience, unavoidably suggests a sense of distance, both of time and of knowledge and sophistication, between the Japanese of 1920 and those of the Rokumeikan era. At several points, we are made to understand that the narrator knows things that Akiko does not. This separation conveys the ambivalent significance the Rokumeikan era held for twentieth-century Japanese, representing both the great enthusiasm and ambition of the early stages of Japan's modernization and a certain self-abnegation and devalorization of the nation's cultural heritage.

These aspects of Akutagawa's text -- its evocation of Japan's own Orientalism, its recapitulation in Akiko's sensibilities of Loti's chauvinism, and its narrative distance from the moment of the ball -- articulate the ambivalence of Akutagawa's position of resistance. He recognized the power and seductiveness of an Orientalist discourse, as well as the irony of his resistance to Loti's text at a time when Japan was in the process of thrusting itself into the dominant position in other colonial relationships.

"The Ball" has been read by Japanese critics as a gentle response to Loti's condescending commentary: "In response to

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<sup>12</sup> NKBT, note 6, 182.

Loti's sarcastic observations and witty criticism in 'A Ball in Edo,' [Akutagawa] does not take a stance paraphrasing this sarcasm," observe the editors of the *Nihon kindai bungaku taikei*.<sup>13</sup> They praise "The Ball" as a lyrical account of a young woman's romantic encounter.<sup>14</sup> To me, the resistant elements of Akutagawa's text seem clear. I argue that he recognized the political ramifications of Loti's text as an expression of the Orientalist impulse, and consciously recast them as a challenge to Loti's dismissals.

In 1923, Akutagawa wrote in an obituary of Loti: "Outside of Koizumi Yakumo [Lafcadio Hearn], Loti was perhaps the European with the strongest connection to Mount Fuji, camellias, and women wearing kimono."<sup>15</sup> Akutagawa made it quite clear that Loti dealt in superficial images that were already trite by the 1920s, but he took care to remind his readers, too, that Loti's other identity was as "the former French naval officer Julien Viaud."<sup>16</sup> In Akutagawa's conception of him, Loti's real-world identity was certainly as important as his literary persona.

The readings that Japanese critics have given to this story, and to the political ramifications of Akutagawa's works in general, are determined by that particular tradition and that ideological environment. Readers of this text now, both Japanese and

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<sup>13</sup> NKBT, note 51, p. 467.

<sup>14</sup> Kimura Shin'ichi, "Butōkai," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke kenkyū*, Kikuchi Hiroshi, et al., eds, Meiji Shoin, 1981, 284-6. Kimura notes that most Japanese critical discussion of the story, while generally regarding it as the most successful of Akutagawa's works set in the *Bunmei kaika* period, focus on the ending, arguing that this emphasizes Akutagawa's theme of the superiority of emotion over facile factual knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> Akutagawa, "Pieru Rochi no shi," in ARZ, v. 10, Iwanami shoten, 1996, 87; orig. in *Jiji shinpō* (evening edition), June 13, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> Akutagawa, "Pieru Rochi no shi," 88.

Western, are likely to be inclined to read it in a more historicist manner. The danger of historicist readings of literary texts is that they can reduce them to historical documents; Akutagawa's text can surely not be boiled down simply to an expression of anti-imperialist resentment. But sensitivity to this discursive element in Akutagawa's texts enriches our reading of this Taishō voice, and of the possibilities that existed in Taishō Japan for literary engagement with the phenomenon of imperialism, whether European or Japanese.