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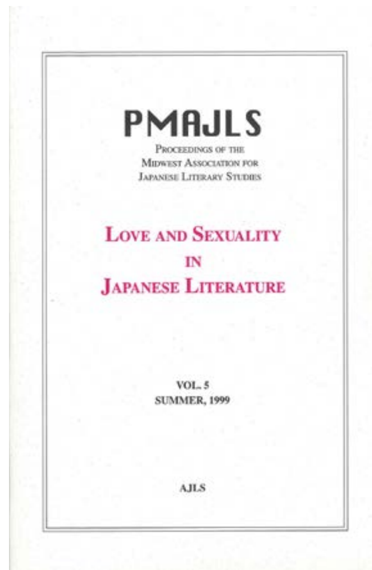
Rebecca Copeland

Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies 5 (1999): 88–100.



PMAJLS 5:
Love and Sexuality in Japanese Literature.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

SEX AND THE LADY TRANSLATOR IN MEIJI JAPAN OR TRANSLATION AS A TRANSSEXUAL ACT

Rebecca Copeland
Washington University in St. Louis

In 1887 Wakamatsu Shizuko (1864–1896, see Figure 1) broke her year-long engagement to Serada Akira and in so doing broke the heart of her mentor Mrs. Miller (1834–1910, Fig. 2). At least temporarily. Mrs. Miller was a missionary with the Dutch Reformed Church in America and the founder of Ferris Women's Seminary in Yokohama (Fig. 3). She had raised Wakamatsu Shizuko (then known by her "real" name Ōkawa Kashi)[1] and had been delighted when Shizuko found herself betrothed to the Christian, Serada Akira. Shizuko's biographers have been equally puzzled by Shizuko's willingness to break her engagement. Her refusal to marry Serada, by all accounts a charming gentleman, seemed to defy Shizuko's own principles and aspirations. Nurtured on Protestant American Christian values, which saw a woman's most significant role as that of wife and mother, Shizuko believedthat a woman's most precious goal was to marry and raise a family. At twenty-four years of age and not in the best of health, it was not likely that Shizuko would find another opportunity to marry a man of Serada's talents and caliber—and marrying a Christian man was a profoundly important responsibility for graduates of Miller's Ferris Seminary. How else might Japan transform itself into a Christian nation—but by the propagation of Christian marriages.

Puzzled by her act, Shizuko's biographers have offered various explanations. She was in poor health, one has claimed. She did not love Serada, others have argued. Whereas the former explanation is undoubtedly accurate, her illness did not prevent her from marrying later. And though it is possible that she did not love Serada, it is unlikely that this alone would have prevented her from marrying a Christian man when Christian men were so few and far between in Japan. She did marry even-

[1] Names, like lives and family bonds were ephemeral during the turbulent years surrounding the Meiji Restoration. Shizuko's father, an Aizu samurai, had been born into the Furukawa family and adopted by the Matsukawas. However, prior to the Restoration he had served as a spy for the Aizu daimyō and had utilized the name "Shimada." Shizuko was born, Shimada Kashi. But she was eventually sent in adoption to a merchant family in Yokohama named Ookawa. Unable to care for her, the Ōkawas soon turned her over to Mrs. Miller. Shizuko remained Ōkawa Kashi until she married Iwamoto Yoshiharu. She adopted the penname Wakamatsu Shizuko in 1886, when she first published in the pages of *Jogaku zasshi.*

tually. In fact, less than a year after she broke this engagement she was engaged to another man—a Christian also: Iwamoto Yoshiharu (1863–1942). Iwamoto has denied any part in Shizuko's broken engagement to Serada, and biographers have taken him at his word. I have done a little sleuthing of my own and have found evidence of Shizuko's love for Iwamoto in the exchanges that they were conducting at the time in the journal, *Jogaku zasshi*[2] Innocent on the surface—indeed quite chaste and proper—the romantic import of these exchanges becomes obvious when we consider the sexual dynamics of translation. But first, a little courtship.

THE COURTSHIP

From September to October 1886, Iwamoto Yoshiharu serialized a biography of Kimura Tō (1848–1886) in the pages of *Jogaku*. Mrs. Kimura had been the co-founder of Meiji Women's School and its chief administrator before she died suddenly of cholera that August. Shizuko had not known Kimura personally, but when she read Iwamoto's biography, she was so moved that she "translated" the first part of his essay, even before he had finished serializing the second. She sent her translation, which took the form of a fifteen-stanza English poem, to Iwamoto by way of condolence, and he published it that October in *Jogaku*. This exchange marks the first "public" correspondence between Iwamoto and Shizuko (Fig. 4). Of course, this correspondence was inspired by and conducted through a mutual admiration for a fellow Christian educator. Nevertheless, the tenor of the communication seems to make it more personal. Shizuko, after all, had not known Mrs. Kimura. She was responding less to the death of a fellow Christian educator than to Iwamoto's evocative portrayal of his own grief. Shizuko was responding to Iwamoto. Interestingly, she spoke to him through the medium of poetry, the medium of love. She did not resort to *waka*, the choice of Heian lovers. Rather, she opted for the English verse of the Victorian lady. To cite a few of her stanzas:

1) Leave me here the papers, friends, nor
   chide thy comrade thus withdrawn;

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[2] *Jogaku zasshi* was the first mass-circulated journal in Japan to address women and women's issues. Founded in 1885 by Iwamoto Yoshiharu and two other men, the journal claimed a responsibility for educating women and enlightening men to the importance of women's roles in the home and society. The journal advocated reforms in the existing family system, and particularly agitated for marriages based on "love."

Leave me with the dead awhile—the
Frail, frail tree of life to mourn.

9) Loved ones miss thee, wife and mother
in thy home congenial;
Thy pew's vacant, death removing
mother rare in Israel.

15) When I weary of life's bivouac
and the race at last is won,
Then thy wings shall waft me
yonder up to meet the Blessed one.

While Shizuko's poetry may not be particularly notable, the small selection cited here reveals not only her ease with English versification, but her close familiarity with the tone of Christian diction. With phrases like "mother rare in Israel," her poem reads as a pastiche of lines from hymns, Biblical scripture, and Victorian verse. Notably, Iwamoto's biography did not contain language clearly identifiable as "Christian." Yet, Shizuko heard in his rendering a Christian hymn, an English poem, a wisp of scripture, and she transcribed Iwamoto's message into the expressions she had come to love from her upbringing in a mission school. Therefore, although Shizuko and Iwamoto were not communicating their thoughts and feelings for one another directly—or even perhaps consciously—they were speaking to each other nevertheless on a very private, spiritual level. For two people so keenly devoted to Christian faith, this was the most appropriate form of communication that they could have chosen.

In the year following this preliminary "exchange" in *Jogaku zasshi*, Shizuko broke her engagement with Serada Akira. Shortly thereafter she and Iwamoto enjoyed another public exchange of prose and verse in the pages of the journal. In May 1888 Iwamoto published *Kajin no nageki* (A Lady's Lament). Although the work is narrated from a woman's perspective, critics conclude that this prose-poem speaks for Iwamoto, revealing his thoughts and feelings for Wakamatsu Shizuko. In it a lady strolls through her garden. Gazing over the flowers there, she reflects on their innocence and peace—qualities she sorely lacks. "I knew not love until I met you," she murmurs. "For you I was taught to love. I knew not pain until I loved you."

Shizuko apparently heard Iwamoto speaking to her through this essay, for again she "translated" his Japanese prose into English verse. His

"*Kajin no nageki*" became her "The Complaint." Unlike the earlier poem in memory of Mrs. Kimura, Shizuko forwent Christian scriptural diction and chose instead the "language of flowers," the traditional Victorian metaphor for feminine sensuality. To quote the fourth stanza:

> "One by one, thou yielded
> "Thy petals willing by shy;
> "Far too tender to with-stand the charm,
> "Potent strange—Oh why!"—
> Her voice was impassioned, low—
> "Am I not like to thee?
> "Who taught me the mystic pain and love,
> "Whoever could but he!"

I do not believe that Shizuko's description of petal pulling is intended to suggest a "deflowering" in the current connotation of the word, but in a very provocative and sensual way, she turned Iwamoto's grief over the pains of love into her "complaint" of love's cruelty and capriciousness. These published exchanges between Iwamoto and Shizuko, platonic and pure on the surface, suggest an undercurrent of mutual passion. The very act of translation—of taking another's words and reproducing them in one's own—demands an intimate commune, as we shall see. But, before moving into what might be considered the sexuality of translation, I will offer a very brief discussion of the regard for translation in the Meiji period and more importantly of women's roles as translators.

Shortly after the onset of the Meiji era, from the 1870s to the mid-1880s, translation was thought to be an important "tool," a bridge, as it were, between Japan and the West. The translator was the necessary channel for this relay of information, and though respected for his skill, the translator was not regarded as an "originator." He was not an "author" and thereby did not have authority over his text. Rather, he was accorded the status of textual medium or authorial helpmeet. Even after translations gained status as "art"—following the contributions of translators as talented as Morita Shiken and Mori Ōgai—the translation still owed allegiance to the original. The beauty of the translation redounded as much to the intrinsic worth and prestige of the Western master narrative, as it did to the skill of the translator. It is not surprising, given this view of translation, that it was considered an appropriate avenue for women. The author Kunikida Doppo (1871–1908), in fact, argued in an 1898 essay that translating was more natural to women than creative writing. Citing the success of Wakamatsu Shizuko and her contemporary Koganei Ki-

miko as proof, he encouraged women to abandon notions of becoming writers and to translate instead.

> To become a writer one needs to be observant. One needs a wealth of time. Occasionally one needs to travel. At times one needs to be alone. And of course, one needs natural talent. Most women cannot ever hope for any of these requirements. But in translation the circumstances are much different, the nature of composition much different. Because translating is mechanical, one can do it whenever one can steal a moment or two. Today one might translate one line, tomorrow a paragraph, and this will not have much impact on the final outcome of the work.[3]

Translation, Doppo concluded, was an appropriate pastime for women because it was so automatic that it required little thought. A woman could attend to her children and to her husband—whom she could consult on difficult matters—and still translate successfully whenever she managed to wrest a little time for herself. Of course, translation required diligence, attention to detail, and faithfulness—but who better than a woman to meet these demands!

TRANSLATION AS A TRANSSEXUAL ACT

Doppo's misogynistic regard of women as creative writers, coupled with his gendering of the translator were not limited to Japan. In the West as well not only had the translator been gendered female but so had the resulting product. "Translations like women," or so the adage went, "should be either beautiful or faithful." The original text, therefore, was the source of authority to which the translation would be subservient—either as a beautiful companion or a loyal wife. Lori Chamberlain, however, in her provocative essay "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation," re-evaluates the role of the translator and the translated text, arguing that in the process of translation a "sex change" of sorts takes place. "The translator is figured as a male seducer; the author, conflated with the conventionally 'feminine' features of his text, is then the 'mistress,' and the masculine pronoun is forced to refer to the feminine attributes of the

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[3] Kunikida Doppo, "Joshi to hon'yaku no koto," *Kunikida Doppo zenshū*, vol. 1 (Gakushū kenkyūsha, 1965), p. 364. This essay was originally published in *Katei zasshi* 2.23 (February 15, 1898).

text."[4] In this sex change, the translator becomes the author, in turn appropriating, or some might say, usurping his role. The translator, thus, becomes the "male seducer" who must take possession of the feminized text and force her to yield to his demands—to his penetrating interrogation of her secrets.

Shizuko's translations, in keeping with Chamberlain's argument, are not merely modest imitations. Rather, her act of translation is an act of aggression, one not unlike a sexual assault. As Chamberlain so aptly puts it in her paraphrase of George Steiner:

> Translation, as an act of interpretation, is a special case of communication, and communication is a sexual act: 'Eros and language mesh at every point. Intercourse and discourse, copula and copulation, are sub-classes of the dominant fact of communication. ...Sex is a profoundly semantic act.'[5]

The sexual semantics of translation are seen with provocative ease in Shizuko's renditions of Iwamoto's texts into English—particularly of his "Lady's Lament." Here, Iwamoto offers himself as the lady whose Japanese text becomes the object of the translator's penetrating gaze. Shizuko, in the role of translator, appropriates Iwamoto's authorial (masculine) position, takes his already feminized voice and reproduces it in an English text—a text that transforms his passive lament into her active complaint.

As a translator, Shizuko claims the authorial position and the power inherent therein. Furthermore, as a woman—necessarily rendered mute by the hegemonic discourse of Meiji (male) modernism—she appropriates the potency of the male voice. Translating from Japanese into English adds a colonial twist to the sexual-textual act. From an Orientalist regard, English, in the late nineteenth-century, was the language of the masculine colonizer; Japanese (when set against the "West") was the language of the feminized territory. Already positioned as the male seducer in her role as translator—colonizer of the textual territory, Shizuko takes the conquest one step further by forcing the Japanese text to submit to the English translation.

Conversely, when she translates English into Japanese, the power inherent in the translator's act allows her linguistic authority over the

[4] Lori Chamberlain, "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation," in Lawrence Venuti, ed. *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 59.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Western language, and thereby topples the usual equation of English masculinity over the feminized Japanese. For example, Frances Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy,* the text Shizuko is famous for translating, enters the arena in the victor's role. As an author, Burnett appears to be the dominant force. And as a member of the West, her text would seem to have cultural superiority over its Orientalized translator. Yet when we regard translation through Chamberlain's formula, we see how Shizuko's translation conquers the English text and in turn renders it feminine by compelling it to yield to the Japanese.

THE AFTERGLOW

In the 1870s and 1880s Meiji men felt that it was their responsibility to enlighten and "rescue" the Meiji woman from the darkness of a feudal tyranny. Meiji men clamored for a "modern Japanese woman" who could represent the progress of the newly evolving Japanese nation. For many male intellectuals, captivated by the Orientalist rhetoric of the West, Woman signified Japan itself, a weak nation amidst superior Western powers. Thus, because these male reformers believed that a nation's civilization could be measured by the status of its women, they judged the condition of womanhood in Japan alongside the condition of Japan in the Western world at large. By improving the status of women, these men assumed, they could improve the status of the nation. Women became the text, as it were, upon which the history and the future of the Japanese nation was inscribed, and man was its author.

When women, however, took the pen and attempted to write their own text—to represent themselves—to remove themselves from the male text and position themselves in authorial roles—they were frequently rebuked by the very men who had sought their liberation in the first place. Although authorship may have been a female prerogative in earlier centuries in Japan, by the Meiji period few recognized female writers as potential participants in a modern enterprise. Writing, particularly the attempt to write in the newly evolving vernacular, was a male privilege. Women who endeavored to write in such a vein were chided as being imitative of men, immodest and worse, perhaps, inept.

By using translation, Shizuko was able to assume the privilege of the male voice (in the case of Iwamoto) and the Western voice (in the case of Burnett). She colonized the would-be colonizer and appropriated for herself the power the original manifested. And she did so in a perfectly feminine way, using translation to veil her own authority. Again to quote Doppo:

> Composing original works encourages publicity; translating invites true merit. The former calls for arrogance; the latter, humility. The former touches on fantasy; the latter, sobriety. This is why translation is, as I have said, a task for women.

By choosing a career as a translator over that of an original author, Shizuko was allowed a virtuous name. Behind her veil of feminine modesty, she succeeded as a wife and mother all the while managing a career (Fig. 5). And in this small and subversive way, she helped open the door to other women who would leave behind the veil to become professional writers.

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FIGURE 1
Wakamatsu Shizuko, approximately 26

FIGURE 2
Mrs. Miller

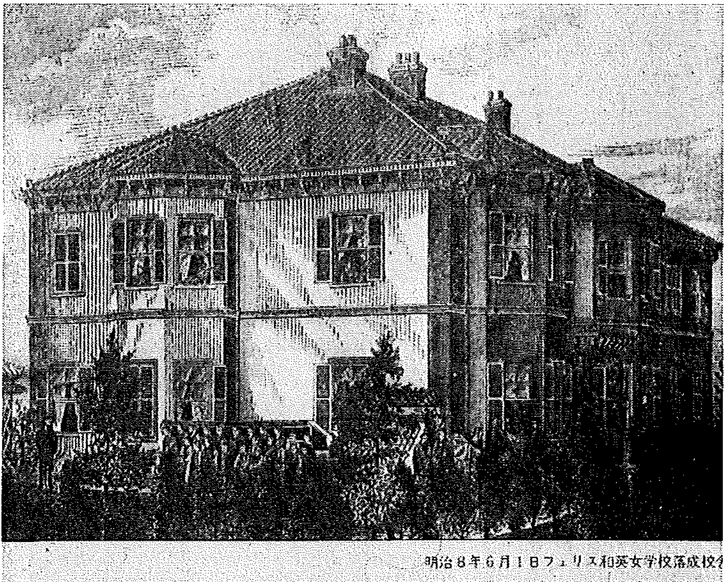

FIGURE 3
Ferris Women's Seminary as shown here shortly after its inauguration in 1875 on the Yokohama Bluffs

FIGURE 4
Shizuko as she would have looked
when she first met Iwamoto Yoshiharu

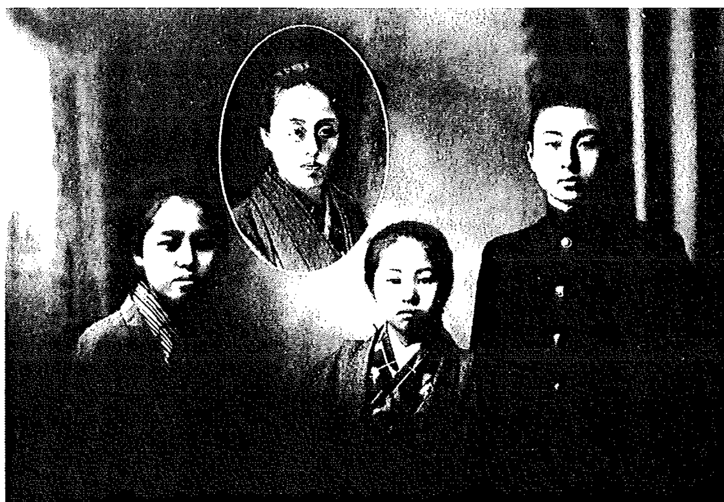

FIGURE 5
Shizuko's children with her photograph superimposed posthumously