

THREE MADAMES AND THEIR DIRTY TALE

"Kokei no sanshō" (1787)

a *sharebon* by Santō Kyōden

Introduced and Translated by
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Japanese literature
of the Edo period (1600-1868)
rendered into English
by his former students
of which this is
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INTRODUCTION

Three Madames and Their Dirty Tale is one of three *sharebon* brothel-fictions published by Santō Kyōden in 1787. At twenty-seven, Kyōden was already lionized as a trend setting *ukiyoe* print artist, writer of comic-books, pornographer, hit lyricist in the brothels, *kyōka* scribbler, fabric designer, and all-weather *flâneur* in the dizzying party scene that would soon grind to a halt with the promotion of Matsudaira Sadanobu to Grand Councillor later that year. Although less widely read than Kyōden's *Last Word on the Leading Bor-*

dellos (*Tsūgen sōmagaki*) of the same year, *Three Madames and Their Dirty Tale* captures a peculiar sense of passing that must have been shared by Edo writers on the shaky crest of *gesaku* playful writing.

The title, like many in the genre, puns on a classical Chinese topos: Three Laughs at Tiger's Gorge, which was also a well-known painting theme about three conversing literati who lost their bearings one day out on a stroll. Kyōden's three confabulating call girls stand in for the three most prosperous brothel districts in Edo: Yoshiwara (the only officially sanctioned one), Fukagawa and Shinagawa. True to *sharebon* style, *Leading Bordellos* takes the reader by skiff and on foot to the Great Gate of Yoshiwara, where he is led indoors for blow by blow coverage of the tricks of the trade. *Three Madames*, on the other hand, focuses on down-to-earth traffic in the Fukagawa and Shinagawa wards. This switch allowed readers to have just enough of a good thing: as Oyoshi tells Onaka, dwelling on Yoshiwara "would be a waste of time since just about everything has already

been written up in that new *sharebon* novella *Last Word on the Leading Bordellos*," just borrowed from sugar daddy and lying by her side.

The three-character setting simply reverses the genders of *Leading Bordellos'* spoony heroes, a frame which goes back to the roots of this genre (Confucius, Lao-tzu and Shakyamuni in *Wise Men in a Den of Iniquity* [*Hijiri no yūkaku*], 1757), and beyond that to the dialogical religio-intellectual tracts of the seventeenth century. A tongue in cheek diatribe between two prostitutes from glistening Yoshiwara and the sordid Irie docks - where painted women "polished their craft in the shade of the lumberyards" - had already taught readers to look for allegory in the clashes between women from different parts (*Seki the Night Hawk* [*Sekifujinden*], 1753). *Sharebon* by Kyōden's time, though, had dropped any hint of allegory, leaving the basic framework of earlier tales open for concocting and filling-in with fashionable gossip. Another obvious debt to history is Kyōden's subtle reuse of Ihara Saikaku's (1642-1693) bluster rhetoric in the first paragraphs, as he describes

the prosperity of Edo and how Oyoshi, Onaka and Oshina come to live back to back in noisy Kingo Alley.

But in some ways the text points forward too, to a sea change gradually approaching fiction set in the brothels. *Three Madames* records an afternoon chat between three world-weary ex-prostitutes on how they *used to do* the things they did; and though their dialogue is rifled with “mud-sludging” realistic details (literally, mud-poking: *Inaka shibai* preface, 1787) that defined the genre and established Kyōden as a top-rung comic writer, the fact that they lived and talked among themselves, “reminiscing about the river that’s safely behind them” in shabby rented rooms, already suggests the tilt toward “human touch” (*ninjō*) narrative that would infuse *sharebon* and its offspring in the next century. Kyōden’s promise “to have each of these ladies narrate her own human touch” (Author’s Preface) is followed up first when Oyoshi performs a drippy *meriyasu* ballad - just like the ones Kyōden was busy scribbling for patrons in Yoshiwara teahouses - sung

in solitude but overheard by Onaka next door. The music signals that Oyoshi’s patron is out and she is alone, free to talk away the afternoon. In textual terms, the lyrics carry us out of a long third-person narrative (if such a thing exists in Edo fiction) into the libretto style dialogue between three women that makes up the bulk of the book.

Among the three long episodes that close the story, Onaka’s exposé of rivalry between Fukagawa in-house courtesans leaves John standing at the door, so to speak. Compared with the sleight of hand treachery between client and prostitute in the two surrounding stories, friendly fire here between two women wrestling for one man brings us nearer to melodrama, where cold facts on how to score count less than the pathos of the struggle itself.

Having said so, however, other passages in *Three Madames* do deliver cold facts in cartons. Kyōden’s pin-point evocation of night life at the Shinagawa post station precisely six years before narrative present owes everything to an old

printed brothel guide he kept on hand as he wrote (*Nankai saikenzu*, 1781). We learn not only that “six or seven years ago, the place was brimming with real hot numbers,” but also the numbers’ names and addresses, including various male entertainers who sang for their dinner then “did their bill collecting the next morning, always in hard cash.” A Shinagawa lexicon is gathered into one passage which paces the reader through the space and time of a brothel engagement. This sort of playful philology presages the writer’s later diggings into the history of early brothel customs and material culture (*Fukagawa taizen*, 1806, etc.), which would then be taken up and developed into a major thread of light literature by the younger ranks of *gesaku* writers.

Lastly, Kyōden was a canny writer at a time when playful writing was on the verge of success as a commodity. *Three Madames* was his first *sharebon* released from a publisher other than old friend Tsutaya Jūzaburō - Tsuruya Kiemon, another major supplier of light literature, published it in tandem with *Inaka shibai* - and this event

parallels the two publishers’ concerted efforts to corner Kyōden’s product in *sharebon* and “yellowback” comics. *Sharebon* had just begun to penetrate the broader web of book distribution, and Kyōden was now paid in cash for his product; he had every reason to keep his finger on the pulse of an expanding readership.

Sadanobu’s Kansei Reforms dealt a fatal blow to Kyōden’s success in 1791, however, when three *sharebon* were banned and their author manacled for almost two months. This incident allowed older samurai writers to part gracefully from a genre they once flocked to, but which by this time had grown tiresome in its endless rounds of petty muckraking. Mass popularity stayed on Kyōden’s side of the fence, however: the chatty sentimental tenor that can be traced to *Three Madames* is drawn out for instance in *The Brocade Lining* (*Nishiki no ura*), one of his banned works, and went on to nourish a whole new generation of romance novels - *ninjōbon* - which were wildly popular with a more plebeian audience in the 1830s. On the eve of a new regime Kyōden was able to

write both history and prospect into his short story about three ways to succeed without ever leaving one's "river" entirely behind.