

A DIVERTING VIEW OF LOYAL RETAINERS

“Onagusami Chūshingura no kangae” (1797)

a *kibyōshi* by Takizawa Bakin

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Japanese literature
of the Edo period (1600-1868)
rendered into English
by his former students
of which this is
the eleventh volume

INTRODUCTION

Like a wool or cotton fiber, Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848) was better long than short. Known for his interminable *yomihon*, he also tried his hand at the brief *kibyōshi*, a form in which his sometime mentor, Santō Kyōden, clearly surpassed him in sophistication and wit.

Even so, there is plenty of humor and visual playfulness here in "A Diverting View of A *Treasury of Loyal Retainers*." Indeed, Bakin's version of this famous vendetta, in which the retainers of Asano Naganori avenged their master's death,

shows us how visually creative gesaku could be. Illustrated by Kitao Shigemasa, the text is a *hanjimonō*, or rebus, where drawn objects represent words or syllables.

This picture writing is not very efficient, of course, since the opacity rather than the (modern) transparency of language is being emphasized. To be sure, Bakin is drawing attention to the sound of words; but he does so by writing phonemes with figures. And, admittedly, it takes a little time to figure the figures out.

What makes this *kibyōshi* 'diverting' rather than simply frustrating is that it is a quiz about something very familiar. For the Japanese reader, the occasion of Asano's retainers breaking into the mansion of Kira Yoshinaka in 1703 was well known. The actual vendetta inspired many narratives, including *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, the most famous of all treatments, originally written for the puppet theater in 1748. In its kabuki metamorphosis, this play remains one of the most frequently performed of all Japanese dramas, thus providing well-known answers for this book of puzzles. If we know the play, then it is amusing to

decipher the pictures and discover the names of famous characters and scenes.

As some review might be in order, allow me briefly to summarize the eleven scenes of Bakin's work, adding some additional material from the play to make the translation more understandable.

1) Ashikaga Tadayoshi meets with three domainal lords. One of them, Kō no Moronao (based on Kira) lusts after Kaoyo, wife of the second lord, En'ya Hangan (based on Asano). She has come to identify the helmet of the deceased Nitta Yoshisada, killed by Ashikaga Takauji. Momonoi Wakasanosuke, the third lord, is also present to witness Moronao's arrogant and even odious behavior.

2) Insulted by Moronao, Wakasanosuke vows to kill him. He is saved from this drastic measure, however, by the resourcefulness of his retainer Kakogawa Honzō. Meanwhile, Honzō's daughter Konami entertains Ōboshi Rikiya, son of Ōboshi Yuranosuke, Hangan's head retainer. Their relationship will suffer because of a tension that develops between families.

3) Honzō secretly offers a bribe to Moronao, who then apologizes to Wakasanosuke. Sagisaka Bannai, Moronao's head retainer, reads the list of lavish bribes that Honzō has offered in order to save his master's life. A fatal conflict is averted.

4) Hangan is less fortunate. Badgered by Moronao, who expects a similar bribe from him, Hangan draws his sword and strikes Moronao on the forehead. Honzō, who happens to be present, grabs Hangan and prevents him from killing Moronao. For both Hangan and Honzō, these acts will eventually require their deaths.

5) One of Hangan's retainers, Hayano Kanpei is distracted by his lover Okaru, who later becomes the object of Bannai's lust. Caught in a classic conflict between duty and passion, Kanpei fails as a samurai by not helping his lord in time of need. As a consequence, he will not be allowed to participate in the vendetta that follows his master's death.

6) Hangan is sentenced to commit *seppuku*. His head retainer, Yuranosuke, rushes to the place of execution in order to be at his master's side. As Hangan dies, Yuranosuke gives assurances that he will avenge his master's death. For strategic

reasons, however, the attack will not happen right away.

7) Now a masterless samurai, Kanpei makes a living as a hunter. He meets another former retainer, Sensaki Yagorō, who hints at the vendetta that is to take place. Kanpei has not been allowed to sign the secret pact to avenge Hangan's death because of his earlier folly. But he will try to buy his way into favor with 50 pieces of gold, which he hopes to get from his father-in-law, Yoichibei. Unfortunately, Sadakurō, a ruthless highwayman, murders Yōichibei and takes the money. When Kanpei later accidentally shoots Sadakurō instead of a wild boar and finds the stolen money on his body, he thinks it a fortuitous gift. (This all happens in complete darkness, so Kanpei does not know who exactly he has killed.)

8) Kanpei returns home to learn that Okaru, Yōichibei's daughter, has sold herself into prostitution in order to raise the money he needs. He produces the 50 pieces of gold, thinking he has spared her, but the bloodied purse is identified as Yōichibei's. When Yōichibei's body is found and brought in, Okaru's mother accuses Kanpei of

murder. Another former retainer, Goemon, appears and refuses to accept the ill-gotten money. Shamed, Kanpei commits *seppuku*. As he is dying, he learns that he did not kill his father-in-law. As his last act, he signs the vendetta pact by pressing his bloody intestines to the petition. Finally accepted into the circle of loyal retainers, he dies a samurai death.

9) Yuranosuke leads a decadent life in order to disguise the fact that he has been planning the vendetta all along. At a teahouse where Okaru is now working, he convinces Bannai, Moronao's man, that he plans no revenge. Heiemon, a foot soldier and Okaru's brother, wants to join the avengers. He reports to Okaru -- their father is dead, Kanpei is dead, and Yuranosuke has become involved with her only because he intends to kill her. Okaru tries to take her own life, but Yuranosuke stops her. He lets Heiemon into the group and avenges Kanpei's death by stabbing Ono no Kodayū, one of Moronao's retainers, who has been spying on them from beneath the floor boards.

10) The vendetta interferes with the planned marriage of Konami, Honzō's daughter, and Rikiya,

Yuranosuke's son. Konami's mother Tonase wants to go ahead with the wedding, but Oishi, Rikiya's mother, thinks Honzō's family is below them since he bribed Moronao in order to save their lord Momonoi Wakanosuke. She will allow the marriage only if Honzō's head is brought to her on a platter. Honzō enters. He insults Yuranosuke and Rikiya. Tonase attacks him, but is pinned down. Rikiya stabs Honzō. Of course, this is just what Honzō wanted. He tells them of his regret for letting Moronao live, and is relieved to learn of the impending vendetta.

11) With the aid of the merchant Gihei, owner of the shop Amakawaya, Yuranosuke's group procures the necessary weapons for the vendetta. They launch a surprise attack on the compound. After much searching, they find Moronao hiding in a woodshed. They execute him and take his head to the Sengaku Temple and present it to their lord's grave.

We can place Bakin's picture version of this play among other attempts to replace words with

images. We know, for instance, that Katsushika Hokusai, working from a tradition of calendar making that employed picture puzzles to indicate the phases of the moon and seasonal rituals, used similar *nazoe* in his personal correspondence. Also, in 1795, Santō Kyōden produced flyers for his Kyōbashi tobacco shop that employed pictures in place of words. So popular were these papers, which doubled as wrappers, that people would come from miles around to shop at Kyōden's. And let us not forget Kitagawa Utamaro's incorporation of *nazoe* into his *bijin-ga* during the years 1796 and 1797. For him, this move was at least partially motivated by an edict, issued in 1796, that prohibited printing the names of "geisha, teahouse women, etc.," thus forcing him to write the name of Okita of the Naniwa House, for instance, with an image of an offering (*oki*) and a picture of a rice paddy (*ta*). Edict or no edict, the publication of his *Komei bijin rokkasen* and *Gonin bijin aikyō kurabe*, the two *nishiki-e* series that employed these curious

name puzzles, coincided precisely with the appearance of "A Diverting View of *A Treasury of Loyal Retainers*." Thus, Bakin's statement of having been caught up in a wave of rebus mania seems well-supported.

Today, the semiotic field has once again become sufficiently visual to appreciate this enthusiasm. Offset printing and digital technology now restore the possibilities of mixing text and image that were once the undeniable advantage of woodblock plasticity.

Then and now, the work of matching text and illustrations is always a challenge. I have designed this book to enhance the puzzling nature of the text. Only by flipping the page will you be able to learn the correct readings of the images. The problem with this format is that it has resulted in an eye-straining font size that will test the patience of the most dedicated scholar.

I apologize for the difficulties this might cause. In the spirit of eighteenth-century Dutch Studies, allow me to suggest the following optical strategy.

- 1) Fill a glass with water.
- 2) Place the glass on a table.
- 3) Get down on your knees, and hold the book with the glass of water between you and the text.
- 4) Carefully move your arms and head backwards and forwards, until the text comes into focus.

By way of this procedure, you will be able to take advantage of the glass' magnifying effects while saving yourself some change and an extra trip to Walgreens. Having tested this method personally, I can say that I have enjoyed good results, especially with a non-fluted glass. For Sensei. *Medetashi, medetashi.*