

Triple-striped Ueda Silk, Woven with Playboys' Whims

“Misujidachi kyaku no ki Ueda”

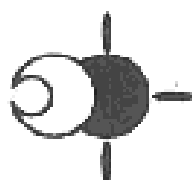
A *kibyōshi* written and illustrated
by Santō Kyōden in 1787

Introduced and Translated by
HARUKO G. IWASAKI

translation © Haruko G. Iwasaki
copyright reverts to the translator upon publication
publication © highmoonoon, 2007
back cover illustration © Yomogida Yasuhiro
cover design by Yamaguchi Kenjiro and T.B. Design
all rights reserved

printed in an edition of 1,000 copies
by Aksornsamai Press
Bangkok, Thailand

highmoonoon



9121 Sunset Boulevard
Hollywood, California 90069, U.S.A.
tel. 310-276-9522
fax. 310-276-0242
highmoonoon.com

an episodic festschrift for Howard Hibbett

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

Santō Kyōden (1761-1816) has long been esteemed as one of the great authors of the popular literature of the late Edo period (1600-1868). Not only is his name memorized by students preparing for their college entrance examinations, it has, with the more recent “Edo boom,” come to symbolize the bubbly playfulness of Edo culture, almost to the point of becoming a kind of mantra.

And yet, perhaps ironically, the new-found availability of the man’s literary oeuvre is just as much cause for despair as for celebration. For how can one hope to read his staggering array of works in many different genres? Kyōden produced over two hundred *kibyōshi*, for instance. This is an even more impressive figure when one considers that this accounts for approximately ten percent of the estimated two thousand extant pieces

produced by dozens if not hundreds of different authors.

Even more daunting than reading his massive oeuvre is the need to read it carefully. More than most other genres, the *kibyōshi* demands a close reading of seemingly minor details. This is especially true of Kyōden's pieces, which may initially seem disarmingly light and brief, but which, upon further inspection, demand an intimate knowledge of many other unrelated genres, media, and modes, visual as well as verbal. When such disparate elements are playfully made to collide together beautifully, the *kibyōshi* effectively becomes the literary version of a handheld sparkler.

One *kibyōshi* that particularly delighted readers with its carefully wrought colorfulness is *Triple-Striped Ueda Silk, Woven With Playboys' Whims* (*Misujidachi kyaku no ki Ueda*, 1787). Like many of the pieces that Kyōden wrote and illustrated during the mid 1780s, the famed publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō also issued this one. The following translation, based on the annotated version of the text in Mizuno Minoru's *Santō Kyōden no kibyōshi* (Yūkō shobō, 1975), comes from the third of the three volumes of this *kibyōshi*.

The story begins with three affluent young townsmen—Baishi, Yaejirō, and Matsutarō (pictured on the frontispieces at the beginning of this essay)—who, bored with the run-of-the-mill encounters in the pleasure quarters, decide to hold a contest to see which one of them can have the most unusual affair with a courtesan. Each volume is devoted to one of these three playboys.

In the opening volume, Baishi brings his five-year-old son to the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter in order to appeal to the maternal instincts of a courtesan. Unfortunately his scheme backfires. The courtesan, instead of finding any interest in Baishi, falls hard for his son, while the little brat wets the bed of luxurious five-layered silk, tips too liberally, and quickly bankrupts his father.

In the second volume, Yaejirō contrives to gain public sympathy by cultivating a sickly courtesan bound to die young. He locates just such a courtesan with the help of a physiognomist and a fortuneteller. Yaejirō pulls out all the stops in preparing for her tragic death. But no sooner is his great memorial to her arranged, replete with flowers and lanterns and ballads, than the courtesan elopes with her young lover.

The final volume, by contrast, is a happy comedy of reversals that nicely rounds off the whole story. Matsutarō is so much in love with being in love that he prefers to pay through the nose to keep his woman in servitude as a courtesan rather than take her as his wife. They carry on their passionate affair into old age. Finally, Matsutarō's son, fed up with Matsutarō's continued shenanigans, forces the geriatric lovers into wedlock.

One of the many charms of this piece resides in the subtle interconnections among the three stories. In fact, these stories can be read together as a progression of sorts, from the parodied love of the five-year-old, through the love of adults who refuse to let death interfere, to the burlesqued love of a couple in old age. These interconnections assume visual form, too, for there are resonances between the images of puppy love in the first volume and the octogenarian love in the last.

Here one senses Kyōden was exploiting his experience as an artist, whose triptychs often conveyed a similar sense of internal contrast and balance in terms of such things as social group, class, and age. It is also likely that Kyōden was trying to create a similar

correspondence in the *sharebon*, that genre of urbane prose sketches of the pleasure quarters. And indeed, as the pre-war critic Yamaguchi Takeshi has noted, some phrases and topics of conversation are repeated almost verbatim in this *kibyōshi* and in *Sōmagaki*, a famous *sharebon* that Kyōden published the same year (*Yamaguchi Takeshi chosakushū* 3).

Kyōden was too masterful a writer for this similarity to have been mere coincidence, let alone carelessness or laziness. Rather, he must have done so deliberately, as an experiment in drawing correspondences between genres, showing how the contexts provided by the *sharebon* and the *kibyōshi* can create two variant effects of the same words in the minds of readers. But the enjoyment of the complex interactions between the two versions were not meant for everyone; it was a privilege reserved only for the most savvy of Kyōden's readers.

Sophisticated, funny, and thoroughly steeped in the adult world of the pleasure quarters, Kyōden's *Tripple-Striped Ueda Silk* may actually represent the swan song of its genre. For the following year, the reform movement that would all but destroy the *kibyōshi* would be launched in earnest. Not

long after, Kyōden himself would be censured, the *sharebon* would be no more, and the spectacular fireworks of the late 1780s would recede into memory.