

**THE BARBERSHOP OF THE
FLOATING WORLD**

(1813-23)

Book 1, Part 1

by

Shikitei Samba (1776-1822)

translated

by

Charles Vilnis

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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 twenty-second volume

INTRODUCTION

Robert Leutner in his book *Shikitei Samba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction* (1986) plumbed the limits of Samba biography. Samba was the son of a publisher's block cutter, then a used bookseller, finally a writer and apothecary. The writer used his works to help sell nostrums through product placement. He was a man much concerned with paying the rent. His characters are equally down-to-earth, witty and profane, urban if not particularly urbane.

I first translated this short passage at a much different time in my own life. Since then I have left academia and become a purveyor of

Japanese rare books. You may consider this statement a product placement of my own.

Read on its own terms, *Ukiyodoko* is a humorous record of the foibles and fantasies of the common run of people in Edo at the turn of the 19th century. In that it succeeds admirably. If it is common, it is nonetheless never trivial, for it has a level of linguistic sophistication which belies its origins and its object.

The beginning of the work, which sets the scene, the literal neighborhood of *Ukiyodoko*, the Barbershop of the Floating World, unrolls the complexity and humor of city life as if it were a picture scroll. In that, it complements the Utagawa Kuninao woodcut illustrations of the book as it was originally printed. Reading, there appears a succession of vivid scenes: Street vendors and shop signs, the seen and the signified unseen, all awakening mental images as the city itself literally awakens on an Edo morning. Further on, characters emerge to speak their parts and ear succeeds eye as narrative vehicle. Instead of the mind's eye we have the mind's ear, as Samba captures the idiom of Edo.

The grumpy retiree, the doltish apprentice, the barber himself, the rake, the bully, the crank scholar – one by one they strut and fret, but they are more puppets than players. If anything they are the voices – the accents – assumed by the storyteller narrator. For Samba is quite obviously indebted to *rakugo* and to the storytellers of that tradition. But things are not that simple, it seems nothing is in late Edo, when you have a living and vibrant literary tradition at least a thousand years old. For the very beginning of the piece, allusive and evocative, with its use of *kakekotoba* and other longstanding techniques of wordplay, inscribes the debt this *kokkeibon* “jokebook” has to *waka* poetry and the classical canon. From near and far, high and low, Samba gathers the many words like leaves.

Finally, from a practical point of view, the original *gōkan* edition of the book was such that the dialogue floated in space next to the speaker, much as it does in a comic book or modern manga. It would have taken real violence for me to force the performative nature of the unrolling scenes into the narrative form of a short story or the like. So this translation takes on the form of a play though that isn't really satisfac-

tory either, as it presents dramatic connotations to the reader foreign to its purpose. It might be closer to the original intent to imagine the whole piece enacted by a single narrator who would throw himself into each character, as it is nearer the performative technique of the *hanashika* raconteurs. You would “hear” the verbal facility and the mimicry of the storytellers and “see” the scene by way of the illustrations accompanying the text. In fact, *Ukiyodoko* was included as a volume in the 1974 series *Edo no rakugo: Ukiyodoko*, ed. by Ōno Takeo, from *Edo Fūzoku Shiryō*, Series V, (Tenbōsha, 1974).

As source material for the translation I relied mostly on *Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Vol. 47 (Shōgakkan, 1971). I also referred to a modern Japanese translation by Kubota Mantarō which appeared in *Edo shōsetsu shū* from the *Nihon no koten* series (Kawade Shobō, 1974).

In the last analysis, *kokkeibon* were examples of popular literature, satirical and often scatological – any translator should know that they are rough trade and need a firm hand. I am afraid my hand has trembled here, but *Binshiken!* I tried!