

THE SHIROKOYA SCANDAL:

TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE CASE
JUDGED BY MAGISTRATE ŌOKA TADASUKÉ

Baba Bunkō's "The Scandal of Okuma of
Shirokoya on Shinzaimoku-chō; The Good
Deeds of Kagaya Chōbei" and "The Decline and
Fall of the House of Shirokoya" (1757)

&

Shunkintei Ryūō's *The Coquette Prefers Black and
Yellow Plaid*, Episodes 10 and 11 (1873)

INTRODUCTIONS AND TRANSLATIONS
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Japanese literature
of the Edo period (1600-1868)
rendered into English
by his former students
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INTRODUCTION TO BABA BUNKŌ'S TEXTS

The popularity of Edo's magistrate Ōoka Tadasuké (1677-1751), Lord of Echizen, inspired countless stories referred to as "Lord Ōoka's Judgments." Among them, the only ones that are based on an actual court case judged by the legendary magistrate are those surrounding the downfall of Shirokoya, an affluent family of lumber merchants in Edo. Shirokoya was founded by a clerk Shōzaburō who had served the famed millionaire Bunzaemon of Kinokuniya (c. 1669-1734) and possibly Bunzaemon, Jr. as well. Once he established the store, he built himself a fortune.

The family's notoriety in Edo soon exceeded the normal gossip about their wealth, however. Edoites reveled in tales of the extravagant life style of Shōzaburō's young wife, a former courtesan from Fukagawa, and of the illicit affair between his married daughter and one of the shop's clerks. In the flourishing metropolis, where economic disparity was unavoidably visible, nothing would have pleased the urban masses more than the downfall of the rich and famous. Baba Bunkō (1718-58), a popular *kōshaku* or *kōdan* narrator and political muckraker, would capitalize on this urban *schadenfreude* and weave the details of the family's fall into popular narrative.

Bunkō's sensational lectures, "The Scandal of Okuma of Shirokoya on Shinzaimoku-chō; The Good Deeds of Kagaya Chōbei" (Shinzaimoku-chō Shirokoya Okuma Adana no Ben; Kagaya Chōbei Jitsugi no Ben) and "The Decline and Fall of the House of Shirokoya" (Shirokoya Ichizoku Bōshitsu no Ben), both included in his *Contemporary Stories Heard in Edo* (Kinsei Edo Chomonshū, hand-copied and circulated, 1757) are purported to be the first publicly orated description of the series of events surrounding the Shirokoya case. His lectures on the subject were performed not while the scandal

was fresh but some three decades after the conclusion of the court case, when he was a very successful *kōshaku* narrator. In them, although he minces no words in attacking the moral degeneration of the rich, Bunkō seems cautiously aware of the laws against writing exposés on the shogun, daimyo, and their families, reporting on contemporary incidents without firm evidence, and propagating heterodox doctrines. His emphatic citation of public records as his sources served not only to ensure credibility but also as a defensive move to protect his lectures from watchful censors. The move may have been unnecessary: the case had taken place decades earlier, under the rule of the eighth shogun Yoshimune (1684-1751), and judged by Magistrate Ōoka, Lord of Echizen, both considered by Bunkō as representatives of a golden age of righteous administration. His usual vindictiveness toward figures of authority in his time is thus largely absent from the pieces on the Shirokoya scandal.

In contrast, in many of his other works Bunkō tended to transgress the borderline between legality and illegality. The nostalgia for the “good old days” may in part reflect Bunkō’s

shift in social standing: under the subsequent ninth shogun Iéshigé (1711-61) he was demoted from a minor but stable samurai position to the status of a ronin. A year after the publication of *Contemporary Stories Heard in Edo*, he was put on trial for the crime of delivering lectures and selling copies of *A Dummy's Guide to Dew Drops in the Woods* (Hirakana Mori no Shizuku). The narrative was based on the so-called Kanamori incident, which involved a series of peasant uprisings against the rigid financial policies and corrupt practices of Kanamori Yorikane (1713-63), lord of Gujō Domain in Mino. The inquisition of the ruler and his administration as well as of peasant groups was carried out in such thorough detail that it inspired curiosity and excitement not unlike the Watergate incident in the U.S. in 1972-74. Bunkō, simultaneously an angry critic of corrupt rulers and entertainer out to cash in on people's excitement about the incident, was ultimately himself embroiled in the drama of massive punishments, and was executed in 1758.

Kōdan, deriving from public readings of epics, featured stories of, among other themes, historical heroes, wars, and vendetta. Bunkō expanded the genre by applying the *kōdan* format

and style to contemporary topics satirizing political, religious, and academic leaders. He often named names as in *One Hundred Monsters of Modern Edo* (Tōdai Edo Hyaku Bakemono, hand-copied, 1758) and other works. In his lectures on the Shirokoya case, an affluent family of merchants represents moral degeneration indicating that, indeed, by his time, commoners had become powerful enough to deserve the sort of vindictive criticism daimyo and other classes received from him. While Bunkō usually spoke and wrote in the formal oratorical style that included classical Chinese expressions and allusions, he also wrote in the *ukiyozōshi* genre as exemplified by his *The Ways of Samurai of Our Time* (Seken Hatamoto Katagi, hand-copied, 1754). His Shirokoya stories are essentially *ukiyozōshi* à la Bunkō. This genre called for the gentler classical Japanese syntax and vocabulary studded with *waka* poems.

This translation is based on Baba Bunkō, *Kinsei Edo Chomonshū*, ed. by Asakura Haruhiko in *Enseki Jisshu*, vol. 5, ed. by Mori Senzō et al. (Chūō Kōronsha, Tokyo, 1980).

Very different in tone and scale, the work of Shunkintei Ryūō (1826-94) is a direct product of Bunkō's legacy. In the sense that he invented the modern genre of popular fiction out of the materials and rhetoric that had made Bunkō famous, Ryūō bridges old Edo storytelling with the modern popular art.

While Bunkō's description of the Shirokoya incident would have given the audience the satisfaction of witnessing hidden truth revealed and, at the same time,

undeservedly affluent citizens punished, coming 120 years later, *The Coquette Prefers Black and Yellow Plaid* (Adamusume Konomi no Hachijō, first performed, 1873; and serially published, 1889), is a crowd-pleaser in a different way. The social criticism here is gentler and narrative flow is prioritized. The audience would have reveled in the richly imagined details and savored the sense of being there in Edo's past. *The Coquette* is a *ninjōbanashi*, or a "human interest" story that was most famously narrated by Shunkintei Ryūō, a *rakugo* performer who settled on this stage name toward the end of his successful career. It is very likely that Ryūō had performed the story in simpler and shorter versions at parties and small huts starting his recitations in the late Edo period and continuing them into the Meiji period, until the story finally evolved into a complex lengthy *ninjōbanashi* that drew the audience for 14 consecutive performances at a major *yosé* theater. His works were based primarily on familiar Edo legends such as *The True Story of Imposter Ten'ichibō* (Jissetsu Ten'ichibō, serially published in 1890-91) and *The Ghost Story of Yotsuya* (Yotsuya Kaidan, published in 1896). His innovation was not in the materials or in rationally organized plots but in a format that accommodated a large number of

characters, a great variety of episodes, and attractively colloquial speech styles, all woven into a believable narrative of downtown Edo life. Despite his popularity in his lifetime, he has not been as lucky as his contemporary and rival San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900), who has continued to attract scholarly and popular attention because of his choice of modern materials and his originality in creating stories. Except for the claim of *The Coquette* as the source for the well-known kabuki play, *Black and Yellow Plaid: An Old Story of Rain* (Tsuyu Kosode Mukashi Hachijō, 1873), popularly called *Shinza the Hairdresser* (Kamiyui Shinza), an adaptation by Kawatake Mokuami (1816-96), the preeminent crime writer for the kabuki stage, Ryūō is all but forgotten.

Bunkō delivered his Shirokoya stories in spite of the shogunate's laws against reporting on contemporary incidents. Ryūō, on the other hand, told his lengthy version at a time when the government encouraged reportages. The latter's audience, without the danger of any possible police raid, frequented the theatre to hear all 14 episodes of the story. However, Bunkō's and Ryūō's works share the ephemeral fortune of orally delivered stories: each has been preserved

and handed down to us almost by accident. While alive, both Bunkō and Ryūō were star narrators: Bunkō owned his own hut in which to perform and Ryūō was one of the first to deliver his stories in a major *yosé* theater. And yet, many of their works were heard only by their contemporary audiences, the oral nature of their performances ensuring that any subtle change or nuance would be lost the moment it was uttered. Only a limited number of Bunkō's lectures are extant. They were originally hand-copied materials that were circulated through lending libraries. As such, there are variants and none bear publisher's imprint of authenticity. Bunkō's arrest and execution would have further complicated the transcription and collection of his performances as possession of his books would have been risky. Indeed, no copy exists of *A Dummy's Guide to Dewdrops in the Woods*, the text for which he was executed. As for Ryūō, not many of his stories were recorded by stenographers nor handed down orally by later narrators. Mokuami's play, mentioned earlier, is popularly performed today, but it features the iniquities of Shinza the Hairdresser rather than the Shirokoya scandal. "A Record on the Life of Okuma of Shirokoya" (Shirokoya Okuma no Ki), collected in *Magistrate*

Ōoka's Judgements (Ōoka Seidan, 1923), which claims to be based on a Meiji-period publication, but is derived from an earlier hand-copied text, is not an adaptation of Ryūō's work, indicating the existence of orally delivered variants on the Shirokoya scandal during the Edo and Meiji periods. Among modern narrations which claim to originate from the Shirokoya scandal, the stenographed and published two-part story by San'yūtei Enshō VI (1900-79) is entitled "Shinza the Hairdresser" and focuses on that aspect of Ryūō's work. Kokontei Shinshō V (1890-1973) created *Shirokiya*, using a similar title and allegedly based on the Shirokoya case, but this conventional short *rakugo* with a final punch line is only remotely related to the Shirokoya story told by Bunkō and Ryūō.

Stories about criminals were rampant in late Edo and Meiji popular culture, and the tales often glorified the reprehensible male and female characters as irresistibly attractive heroes. In *The Coquette*, however, criminals are not evil by nature, and their malfeasance is rather artless. Even the notorious thug Shinza the Hairdresser is not made into a star. The only moment in which criminals are glorified is when Kuma and her

lover Chūhachi are portrayed as a handsome pair in the scene of the procession of the condemned. The work instead appeals to the contemporary urban citizens' interest and confidence in the justice system and their sympathy for the earlier Edo model. The city of Edo had a well-developed police and judicial system, supported by the voluntary participation of highly-respected citizens culled from the city's many neighborhoods. The city magistrate presided over civil matters and acted as a mayor, chief of police, and head judge in one. The magistrate's official mansion included his office as well as a court of law, which consisted of a cleared section of ground covered with white sand upon which litigants would sit. Police inspectors (*yoriki*) cut dashing figures as they made their rounds through the city, always followed by subordinate officers (*dōshin*). Hatchōbori was the equivalent of Scotland Yard, and the name applied both to the police force and the area in which inspectors and officers lived. Likewise, Tenma-chō referred to the street as well as to the prison where suspects were held between the time of their arrest and the final verdict. Among common citizens, a neighborhood representative (*chōyakunin*) looked after his community.

Landlords (managers of rented property) assumed the responsibility and authority in overseeing the tenement dwellers' behavior. As the following story illustrates, the matrimonial go-between supervised the affairs of the young couple and their growing family so that he, too, answered to the magistrate's office if any questions arose. The Five Household Group system made five heads of property-owning households responsible for one another's as well as tenement dwellers' conduct. The popularity of crime stories in Edo had much to do with the citizens' fascination with the police and magistrates as well as their own involvement in representing and guarding their neighborhoods. The Meiji audience's interest and faith in the rational outlay of evidence and eyewitness testimony are dramatized particularly well in the battle of wits between the wily suspect Tsuné and the genius judge, Lord of Echizen. The detailed and suspenseful depiction of court procedures make *The Coquette* a new form of popular fiction in Japan at the time: a serialized courtroom drama, or judicial romance, similar to the long-running TV series based on Erle Stanley Gardner's *Perry Mason*.

Like Enchō's works, some of Ryūō's orally delivered stories were written down in shorthand for publication. *The Coquette* was transcribed presumably verbatim by Sakai Shōzō (1860-1915), a leading stenographer for oral narratives, and published as a series of five special monthly supplements to the *Yamato Shinbun* newspaper from July 14 to November 22, 1889. An orally transmitted story of the length of *The Coquette* requires the narrator to repeatedly refer to the events and actions that take place in earlier episodes, allowing new audience members to enter the series at any point and still follow the story. For that reason, the reader should be able to infer events outside the episodes translated below. The exception may be the story line centering on Shinza the Hairdresser. Appearing in the first part of the narrative, this story line is pushed aside in the latter half of the series. It merits a short summary here. In the first episode, Kuma, already married to Matashirō for the sake of his dowry of 500 *ryō*, is kidnapped by Shinza, who hopes to extract ransom from Kuma's wealthy parents. Yatarō Genshichi, an influential gambler boss in the neighborhood, is asked to negotiate with Shinza for Kuma's return, but the old boss fails miserably and Shinza, the up-and-

coming leader in the gamblers' ring, takes power. Having lost faith and influence among the gamblers, Genshichi murders Shinza, along with an old couple who might testify against him. Shōnosuké, Kuma's disowned brother, is erroneously arrested for Genshichi's felony, but is saved by the testimony of Hachigorō of Hell's Burning Wheel, who, at the trial, severely criticizes the Magistrate's office for its mistrial of his earlier crime. The Magistrate, Lord of Echizen, with the mind of Sherlock Holmes, uses the lack of dirt on the skirt of Genshichi's raincoat as proof of his guilt and Shōnosuké's innocence.

Presented here are Episode 10, concerning the crimes that result in the first trial of the Shirokoya case, and the end of Episode 11, which concludes the trial. Omitted from the translation is a short interlude that tells an independent story detailing the virtue of Doctor Tomonoshin, who appears toward the end of Episode 11 to help solve the case by curing Matashirō, driven mad by his brush with death.

This translation is based on Shunkintei Ryūō, *Adamusume Konomi no Hachijō*, ed. by Nobuhiro Shinji, in *Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*

Meiji-hen, vol. 7 (Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 2008). I am indebted to Professor Nobuhiro for his learned commentaries on Ryūō's work. The illustration from *The Yamato Shinbun* supplement in his personal collection is reprinted here with his permission.