

LAUGHS TO BANISH SLEEP

Selections from *Seisuishō* (1623)

by Anrakuan Sakuden

Introduced and Translated by

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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 sixth volume

INTRODUCTION

Translator's note: the following introduction was vouchsafed in a dream (musō) by a man in white coat—a Shinto deity one hopes—after which I awoke, laughing.

Late one night in my study, weary of lucubration, my eyelids at length grew so heavy that I cast about for an entertaining volume to divert the mind and refresh the imagination.

Running my finger along the spines of one after another quaint and curious *bunkobon* gathering dust on the shelves, I came upon two substantial books bearing the promising title *Seisuishō*, “Laughs To Banish Sleep.” Indeed, fatigue left me as I leafed at random through one diverting anecdote after another that brought a world centuries old once again to life. Ever ready to subordinate entertainment to didacticism, I turned from the stories themselves to the learned preface and then to certain other weighty reference works, which noted that *Seisuishō* is regarded as a progenitor of the genre of “humorous stories” (*hanashibon*) and remains the largest of such collections, containing more than one thousand anecdotes unevenly divided into eight parts and forty-two chapters.¹ It was compiled by the Kyoto abbot and tea connoisseur Anrakuan Sakuden (1554-1642), whose longevity demonstrates the healing power of laughter. The preface and postscript by the good monk relate that he undertook the compilation at the suggestion of the shogunal deputy in the capital, who was evidently not as pompous a bureaucrat as his office might

suggest. The collection was completed in 1623 and presented in 1628.

Seisuishō, continues the received wisdom, is a *kanazōshi*, and as such it occupies a middle ground between medieval tales, which often gave a bitter evangelical pill a sugar coating of entertainment, and later Edo-period *ukiyozōshi*, which were composed primarily to give enjoyment and were disseminated not by monks with an eye to salvation but by publishers focusing on flush townsmen and the Bottom Line. Sakuden’s work was meant for elites, like his friends the warrior-architect Kobori Enshū and the *haikai* poet Matsunaga Teitoku, and both its subject matter and rhetorical style anticipated readers who were involved in the traditional arts themselves and were familiar with the literary and historical figures that populate the book’s pages. Many of its stories rely on puns, often embedded in humorous poetry, for their slightly donnish comic effect. Even so, the book was written to entertain, and it succeeded brilliantly, eventually generating abridged editions. But as time went

on, the growing townsman audience clamored for tales about its own society told in snappier and more trenchant language. By the latter half of the Edo period, the collection that had banished sleep for thousands now brought yawns to all but scholars and antiquarians, who were intent on reconstructing its vanished late medieval world of monks and warriors, catamites and linked-verse poets, or who were fascinated by the book's now old-fashioned and occasionally obscure literary style, rich in early seventeenth-century dialogue redolent of even older storytelling traditions.

I have translated here twenty-eight tales (the same pious number as the books of *The Lotus Sutra*). All of them deal with the arts, most notably poetry, but also *nō*, *kōwakamai*, *Heike biwa*, and tea. But surely you too, good reader, are by now stifling yawns yourself; let us turn to the Reverend Sakuden's laughter forthwith.