

**BIOGRAPHIES OF LIMP DICKS
IN SECLUSION**

Naemara in'itsu den (1768)

by Hiraga Gennai

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 eighth volume

INTRODUCTION

In Hiraga Gennai's (1728-80) characteristically provocative history of major events and figures from Japanese and Chinese history, male sexual prowess in the form of the phallus operates as a metaphor for military and political power. Great military victors brandish phalluses of imposing size and strength, while the

vanquished are rendered impotent, both politically as well as sexually. Following this survey of battles and conquest, the narrative shifts to the depiction of an individual "urban recluse," to be identified by the reader as Gennai's alter ego. This character, Godôken, disciple of the scandalous Edo raconteur Fukai Shidôken (1680?-1765, also hero of Gennai's 1763 *Biography of the Stylish Shidôken*, or *Fûryû Shidôken den*), is depicted as the possessor of uncommon sexual powers, but who, because the contemporary military bureaucracy has no need for his talents, takes pride in his ability to exist in spite of the fact that he languishes with no official outlets for ambitions.

We can read this work from multiple perspectives. Our first reading might focus on the text as an outrageous compendium of names for male genitalia, and we can laugh at the "Hall of Fame" of

historical figures as various properties of the phallus are applied to them. In the latter part of the text, we might then reflect upon the self-consciously independent nature of the narrator as he distances himself from a socio-political order he believes to be simultaneously power-obsessed and also blind to his potentially valuable talents. Finally, we might read the text proper together with the Foreword and Afterword as a satire on the venerable East Asian genre of "Biographies of Hermits," such as the "*Yin-i ch'uan*" section of each of the Chinese dynastic histories starting with that of the Hsin dynasty (265-419), and in Japan, Gensei's *Fusô in'itsu den* ("Biographies of Japanese Recluses," published, 1664) or Ihara Saikaku's *Kindai yasainja* ("Modern Stylish Recluses," published, 1686).

We should further note that Gennai was not the first Japanese to personify the

phallus in a biography. Fujiwara no Akihira (989?-1066) included in his collection of 427 examples of poetry and prose in Chinese by Japanese intellectuals, the *Honchô monzui* ("Exemplary Writings from Our Court"), a certain "Biography of Sledgehammer" (*Tettsui den*, included in volume 12. A *kokatsuji*, or "old-style moveable type," version of *Honchô monzui* appeared in print in 1629, and a blockprinted version came out in 1644, which would have allowed Gennai access to this text). In contrast to Gennai's "Limp Dick" living in semi-retirement, Akihira's "Sledgehammer" is a phallic Heian courtier aristocrat, one of the official vanguard "opening up" the frontiers. While written in four-character Chinese phrases intended for an elite audience, "Sledgehammer" retains a level of humor totally divorced from the political realities of the time. This lack of a subtext is perhaps the main

quality separating Akihira's from Gennai's work. When we encounter "Limp Dick," we are continually prodded to consider the life depicted therein in the context of the rigid rules and procedures in force in the martial-oriented institutions of the 1760s. Beneath Gennai's playfulness flows an undercurrent of frustration and disillusionment that grows only stronger in his later works.

I have prepared this translation from the following modern edition:

Nakamura Yukihiko, ed. and annot., *Fûrai Sanjin shû* NKBT 55, Tôkyô: Iwanami Shoten, 1961: pp. 257-65.

This modern edition, in turn, used the following source:

Hiraga Gennai, *Naemara in'itsu den* (believed

to have been published as a separate work, Edo: Shunjudô, 1768). Included in Tenjiku Rôjin (Morishima Chûryô 1754/56-1808/10) ed., *Six Works by Fûrai (Fûrai rokubu shû*, pref., 1780, pub. Edo: Taikandô Fushimiya Zenroku, n.d.).