JAPANESE FICTION–Early Modern Period
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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, ToyotomiHideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Fiction

Fiction writing in Japan had been in decline since thetowering achievement of Heian writers, epitomized by MurasakiShikibu's*Tale of Genji*. Poetry, in its various formal modes, ranked as the dominant genre during the medieval period. Prose narrative constituted a grab-bag of accounts, written in a popular idiom and referred to as *setsuwa*, that featured historical and legendary figures. Such narratives became popular during the early Tokugawa period, under the new heading of *kanazôshi*— printed booklets aimed at a broad readership that was increasingly centered in cities such as Edo and Osaka. These booklets were a mix of fanciful tales, parodies, and popular guides and handbooks.

It was the end of the 17th century— the so-called*Genroku* years (ca 1680-1720)— that marked the renaissance of Japanese arts and culture across a broad spectrum. A taste for fiction was re-established, and its chief exponent was a virtuoso writer named Ihara Saikaku (1642-93), whose works would set a high standard for fiction-writing.Yet it was the very popularity of the 'Saikaku style' that would contribute to its gradual decline in the 19th century. What emerged was a widespread taste for light literary entertainments— *gesaku*— fostered by publishers and booksellers that now dominated the marketplace.

Fictions of Passion and Style

Tokugawa culture has long been known for its celebration of style and fashion, a reflection of the materialist proclivities of the merchant class, the *chônin*. Being 'in the know' was essential and the new culture hero was the so-called*tsûjin*, the savvy connoisseur and arbiter of taste.The 'rule of style' is most evident in the visual and decorative arts, but its literary corollary can be found in the work of *chônin*-oriented writers. The key figure here is Saikaku, the great prose stylist of the age, whose best-known

fiction focuses on the sordid affairs of those who fall prey to the weaknesses of the flesh and the allurements of money. Flouting the official codes of propriety and self-restraint, Saikaku's 'floating-world tales' of passion and desire provide a stunning parody of contemporary society through the comic pratfalls and foibles of ordinary folk.

Itself a parody of a well-known scene from *Genji*, the following passage from *Five Women Who Loved Love* (Kôshokugoninonna, 1686) concerns several young rakes who are engaged in evaluating the female passers-by:

> Next they spied a lady who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, with a gracefully long neck and intelligent-looking eyes, above which could be seen a natural hairline of rare beauty. True, her nose stood a little high, but that could easily be tolerated. Underneath she wore white satin; over that, light blue satin; and outside, reddish-yellow satin. Each garment was luxuriously lined with the same material. On her left sleeve was a hand-painted likeness of the Yoshida monk, in a beautifully-wrought pose that conjured the famous passage, "sitting alone and reading old books under the lamp light." This was most assuredly a woman of exquisite taste! . . .

> "What a prize for some lucky fellow!" one of the young bucks exclaimed. But his words were hardly uttered when the lady, stopping to speak with an attendant, opened her mouth, and revealed a missing lower tooth— to the complete disillusionment of her admirers.

Saikaku'slavishly-descriptive tales, which presume familiarity with contemporary fashion and taste, all but cry out for illustration. In fact, Tokugawa literary works were routinely accompanied by pictorial depiction of important scenes, and the texts themselves were rendered in a matching calligraphic style. In other words, the artfully presented 'surface' meant as much as the 'content' of the tale. The distinction we make between 'art' and 'literature' had little validity, given that narrative and pictorial elements were virtually indistinguishable.

Saikaku's portrayals of human eccentricity and self-deception possess a distinctly comic tone. The author has us look beyond the façade of elegance to discover the inevitable wart, the telling flaw. His parodies of parvenu *chônin* and wayward samurai constitute a typology of cads, misers, star-crossed lovers, and scoundrels that recalls the comic genius of the great French playwright Molière.

One such character is Fuji-ichi, an East-Asian forerunner of the archetypal literary miser, Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge.

> The millionaire Fuji-ichi lived in a rented house no more than four yards wide. He was a clever man, and his fortune was amassed in his own lifetime. . . Fuji-ichi never passed up anything which might be of use. Even if he happened to stumble, he would use the opportunity to pick up stones for fire-lighters and tuck them in his sleeve. One must pay attention to a thousand such things.

> Yet Fuji-ichi was not a miser by nature. It was merely his ambition to serve as a model for others in the management of everyday affairs. . . Nothing delighted him more than watching over his daughter. When the young girl grew into womanhood he had a marriage screen constructed for her. . . Thinking that illustrations of *The Tale of Genji* or *Tales of Ise* might engender frivolous thoughts, he had the screen painted with busy scenes of the silver and copper mines at Tada. He composed instructional verses on the subject of economy and made his daughter recite them aloud.

As noted above, Saikaku's mastery of stylish and witty fictional narrative influenced subsequent generations of writers, who sought to emulate the 'Saikaku style.' But there were other noteworthy developments on the fictional scene. For instance, the Osaka-based writer Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) revived the old *setsuwa* genre with the publication of *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (Ugetsumonogatari, 1776). The work comprises nine tales of the supernatural, drawn from Japanese and Chinese legends, which convey a memorably eerie, macabre quality. The work enjoyed great popularity, and its 1953 film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji is considered one of the masterworks of world cinema.

Late Tokugawa Fiction

The comic spirit of Saikaku marks the work of late-Tokugawa writers, for whom stylishness and a deft comic touch were literary virtues. For instance, SantôKyôden (1761-1816) produced many works in the so-called *sharebon*genre— 'books of style.' These centered on the pleasure quarters, the lively domain of the alluring geisha and the savvy *tsûjin*. A genre of explicitly comic fiction— *kokkeibon*— is epitomized in the work of two popular writers. ShikiteiSanba (1776-1822) is best known for his*Bathhouse of the Floating World*(Ukiyoburo, 1809-13). Here, the comings and goings of those who frequent the local bathhouse (*ofuro*)represent a cross-section of society and provide a vehicle fora rousing parody of human foibles. For his part, the writer JippenshaIkku(1765-1831) produced, over a twenty-year period, a much-admired account of two buddies who ply the great Tôkaidô road spanning Edo and Osaka. This sprawling work, entitled *Shank's Mare* (Hizakurige, 1802-22), comprises hundreds of episodes featuring the comic pair, Yaji and Kita, whose picaresque adventures amount to an encyclopedia of mischief and comic pratfalls. Again, all of these works were accompanied by copious woodblock illustrations, which enhanced the readers' enjoyment.

One final figure deserves mention— Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848). Arguably the final major fiction writer of the Tokugawa period, Bakinproducedwhat may be the longest novel ever written. Bearing the improbable named of*Hakkenden* (The Biography of Eight Dogs, 1814-42), this 106-volume epic traces, through an intricately interwoven series of romantic intrigues andheroic exploits, the eventual restoration of a proud family's good name. A mix of dramatic narrative and samurai virtue, Bakin's ponderous masterwork has been repurposed in the form of recent manga and anime versions that have been widely admired.

Conclusion

Tokugawa fiction, as withother literary and arts genres, can be said to reflect Japan's centuries-long *sakoku* policy of isolation and insularity. The creative stasis that marks mid-19th century culture in effect awaited the sort of catalyst that would come into play following the nation's opening up to the Western world.

Sources

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Question and issues:

Tokugawa fiction is notably superficial, in its preference for stylish display and comic 'lightness.' What are the positive and negative aspects of such 'superficiality'? What can be said in favor ofSaikaku's tales focusing on the pursuit of sexual gratification and wealth— and the inevitable pitfalls of such pursuits?

What can be learned about Tokugawa society from its fictional portrayals? Overall, what do we stand to gain from reading fiction?

Compare Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (available in a fine English translation) with the classic film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji. What conclusions can you draw from such a comparison?

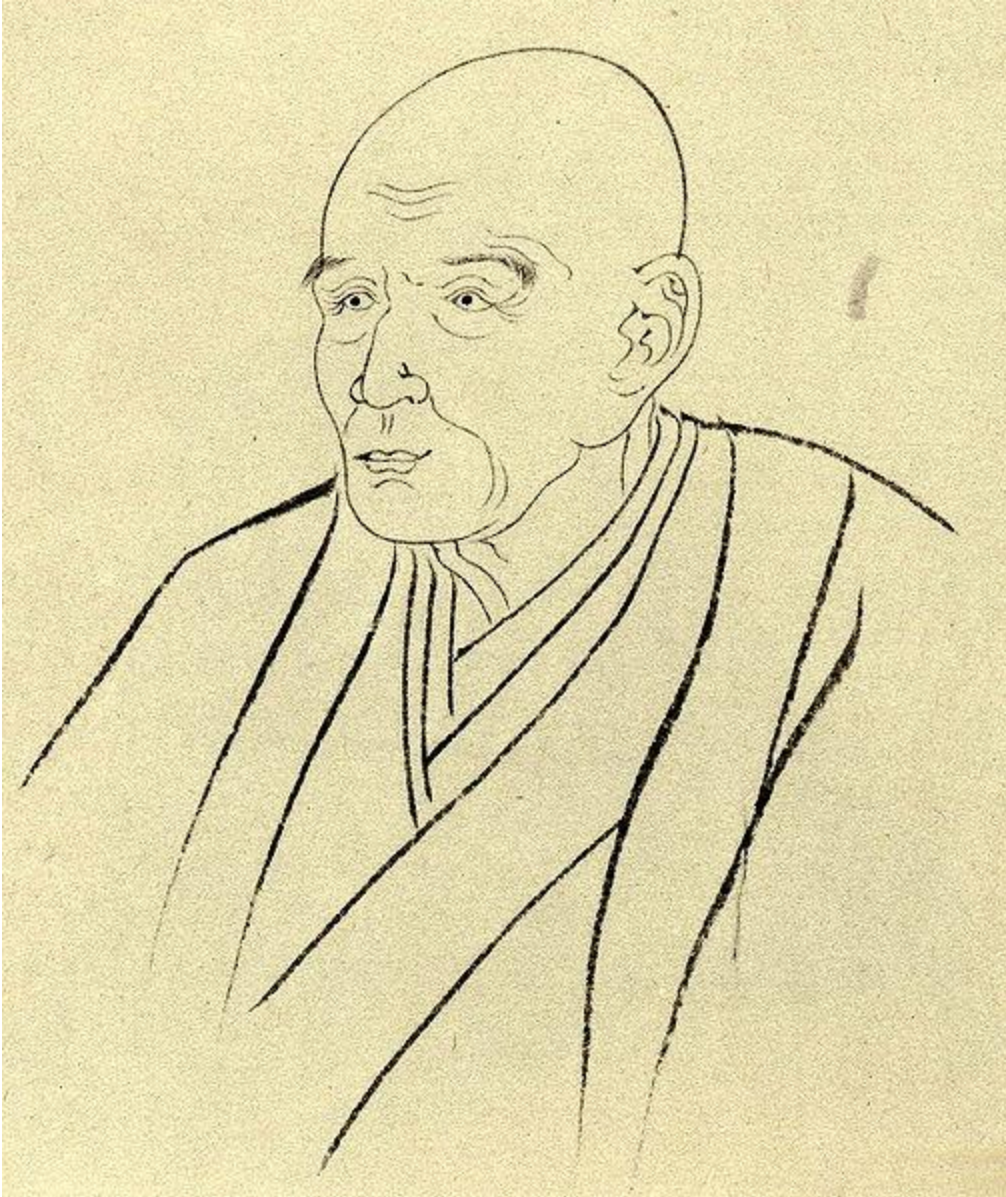As one of the three pillars of Genroku literature, how does Saikaku compare with Bashô and Chikamatsu?

Images
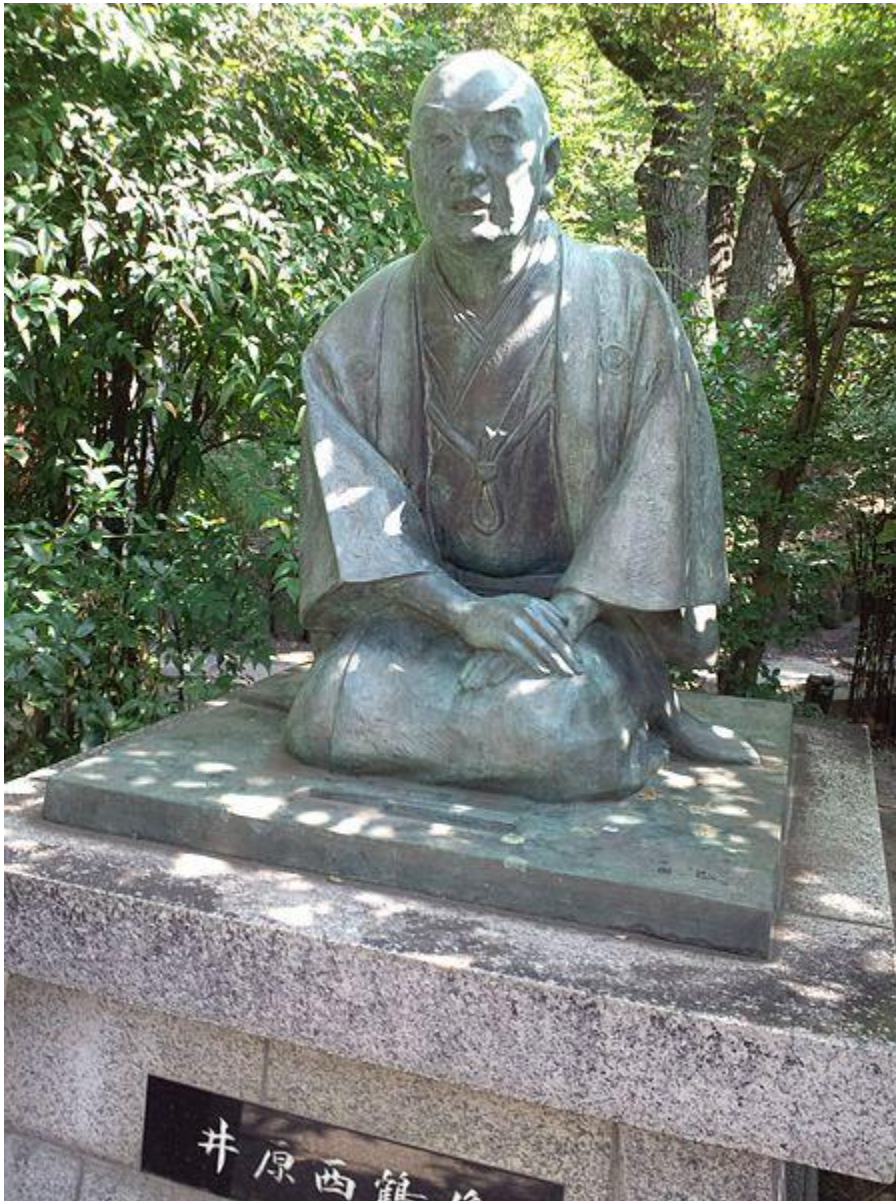
Statue of Ihara Saikaku, in Osaka

Title page (right) and introduction (left) to Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsumonogatari* Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776)

Portrait of Takizawa Bakin by Kunisada, ca 1840

2005 *manga* adaptation of Bakin's monumental novel, *Hakkenden*

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