

Book review*

M.W. Shores (2021). *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan: Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rakugo (落語, meaning “fallen word”, with reference to its punchy ending) is sometimes called *sit-down comedy* as opposed to Western *stand-up*. One of Japan’s leading traditional comic arts, it continues to be popular with modern audiences. Humour scholars may be aware of the few artists who have recently begun to introduce *rakugo* to English-speaking audiences (*eigo-rakugo*: for a video example by a Japan-trained Canadian storyteller, see Katsura Sunshine 2014).

M.W. Shores is another such trained performer who spent more than a decade in Japan studying under two different *rakugo* masters (p. 17). He is also an historian of Japan, having taught at Peterhouse, Cambridge, and now the University of Sydney, Australia. Most northern summers since 2015, he has directed Traditional Theatre Training (TTT) at the Kyoto Art Center. Well-qualified therefore to author this important new study of *rakugo*, Shores sets out to correct an imbalance in existing accounts by focusing on the lesser known but hugely successful tradition that arose in the Kamigata region around Osaka, the merchant capital of Japan. As he points out, the better-known Tokyo-based variety is indelibly marked by the Imperial capital’s aristocratic, samurai past and prides itself on a highly literary aesthetic. Kamagata *rakugosa* (performers) however revel in striking dramatic and musical effects (often parodying more serious forms of entertainment such as Noh drama) and employ lots of broad humour. Their narratives revolve around traditional merchant culture characters and include many strong women as well as male figures. Indeed, to the shock and horror of Japanese critics in earlier times, Kamigata *rakugo* performances have always been patronised as much by women as men. And today, women *rakugosa* are increasingly finding fame and fortune (Shores, 2022).

This study is very clearly written and referenced. It is well presented with many black and white photos and old wood-block prints, conveying a lively sense of *rakugo* performances, individual artists and locales. Somewhat surprisingly for such a highly rated academic press as Cambridge University, however, the index is not as reliable as could be wished especially in topic-word entries (take *wordplay* for example, where this writer was defeated by all three given page references). Modern presses unfortunately prefer the cost-savings available from making up early (therefore inaccurately) paginated machine-prepared indices which not only fail to support the work of excellent scholars but succeed in annoying their readers (publishers: please take note). Nevertheless, the technical aspects of Japanese terms and their translations are very well addressed here, despite the regrettable absence of characters (in both Japanese and Chinese,

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characters define proper names and titles of works, for example). Thus, the book should be a valuable resource for scholars of Japanese culture as well as for a more general readership.

The book opens with an exceptionally well-documented description of the genre and its history in Osakan culture, tracing origins and leading practitioners as well as the impact of modern technologies. The rise of mass media and the role played by Osaka as a cradle of comedy production have led over time to a somewhat ambivalent relationship between *rakugo* as a living art and the all-important Osakan production company, Yoshimoto Kōgyō, which at first promoted the genre as being short and well-suited to broadcasting (and telecasting) but then favoured more modernising comic forms such as *manzai* (stand-up). But *rakugo* is far from being a dying or static art, as the book makes clear. On the contrary, it is alive and well, enjoying something of a renaissance and adapting constantly to new and younger audiences.

The marked differences between Kamigata style and Tokyo style are key to this success and Shores' account conveys them very well. Osakan narratives are highly realistic about daily life and quite earthy in their comic foci. Their style is summed up in the word *hade*: more dramatic, livelier in the body movements of the seated narrator, more extensive in use of musical accompaniment (as noted above, often itself a source of humour) and often spoken in a faster tempo than Tokyo style (pp. 104-105, and 150-158). There is even a delightful description of what sounds very much like Gilbert and Sullivan style patter (p. 105). Topics and plots happily deal with characters at all social levels, women as well as men, and acknowledge their common appetites and the lower bodily stratum in specific detail. An illustration is the graphic story of collective peeing, part of the narrative entitled *Kinshu sekisho* (*Alcohol prohibition checkpoint*). Here, a group of employees sets out to evade the local checkpoint that prevents the purchase of alcohol as they are trying to make a delivery to an extremely well-paying customer. After brainstorming the challenge confronting them, they take a bottle of sake and place it inside a larger container, first choosing one full of sweets (but it's no go: the checkpoint inspector gobbles the lot and finds the sake); then one of oil; and finally, a more off-putting bodily substance to deter the inspector. But getting enough urine from all of them into the container so that the sake bottle is covered up is itself a challenge, described by the *rakugoka* in detail (including the need for a funnel for one of the women), accompanied by what must surely be gales of laughter (p. 125). No wonder Tokyo critics frowned.

Humour scholars will particularly appreciate the detailed discussion of the nature and operation of the transgressive elements that characterise *rakugo* plots in general (pp. 152-158). Five complete texts are also provided as source material (chapter 5) and Appendix 1 lists selected titles in the Kamigata tradition. The author makes a convincing case that, despite their *gekokujiō* nature (a term that is pleasingly translated elsewhere as topsy-turvydom, see Wells 2007), the humour of these narratives is not satire (p. 157). Rather, it offers a wry acknowledgment of humanity's less-than-ideal condition and allows audiences the pleasure of indulging briefly in non-seriousness (Chafe, 2007, cited on p. 157) before returning to everyday reality.

Adding greatly to the book is an extended interview with Shores' own *shishō* (master) Hayashiya Somemaru IV. The author admits that it was a challenge to do the interviewing when he was merely a *deshi* (pupil), owing complete respect to the subject of the interview. Nevertheless, the mutual understanding between teacher and pupil is clear and the interviewer's attempt to draw out the master's perspective affords the reader some deep insights. This interview is an important part of the book, bringing into play the practitioner point of view, including a stress upon the importance of the rapport between *rakugoka* and audience (pp. 140-141). Like theatre, *rakugo* depends on its liveness, and it does not spring as easily to life in recorded formats, whether audio, film or TV. Somemaru IV also points out that *rakugoka* resemble their own merchant characters (at least in the Kamigata tradition): they are

salespersons with (artistic) wares for sale. Thus, if you cannot experience your audience's reactions in real time, how do you know whether your product is succeeding or not? It is only from live performance then that one can hone one's art. And of 200 stories that the master knows by heart, he considers only 30 properly honed and "fit for performance" (these form his *mochi neta* or repertoire; p. 141). The experienced artist's wisdom shines out as he explains how a *shishō* must have *deshi* since it is really by teaching that one deepens one's knowledge of an art (p. 142, and those of us who teach will readily agree). For Somemaru IV, adjusting traditional materials to contemporary audiences is an essential part of *rakugo*, unlike other Japanese performance arts such as Noh and *bunraku* (puppet theatre) which are justly celebrated but now set in stone and unable any longer to respond to a popular audience (p. 140). For those interested to know more of the different Kamigata *rakugoka* training schools, an appendix shows the names of past masters and lines of descent.

Rakugo as an art form has had some unexpected help from Westerners along the way. Two points in its history stand out from Shores' narrative. Firstly, when modern technology first arrived and sound recording became available, *rakugo* was quick to benefit. Recordings of *rakugo* began in 1903 in a Tokyo hotel room, with technical assistance from the remarkable Australian-born *rakugo* performer, Henry Black (Kairakutei Burakku I, 1858-1923) and from Fred Gaisberg (1873-1951) of the Victor Talking Machine Company, who pioneered recording in India and Russia as well as Japan (p. 73). Later, like all Japanese arts and modes of expression in the post-War era, *rakugo* was threatened by controls enacted during the long years of military occupation from 1945-1952. Under General McArthur as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, bans on various forms of popular expression were implemented. Shores reports however that *rakugo* was granted an exemption, largely due to the support of a bilingual Japanese-American official, Frank Shōzō Baba, a member of the Radio Division of the administration's Civil Information and Education Section from December 1945 (p. 82). This excellent book can itself be considered another invaluable intervention in the history of *rakugo*. Shores' expert insights into this brilliant and ever-evolving humorous art will surely help spread its fame around the world and promote the cause of cross-cultural humour studies. It is a joy to read.

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