

Diverting Desires and Audiences: Kabuki, *Fūzoku*, and the State in Late Tokugawa Japan

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Today, rather than plays imitating the world, plays have become the basis (*moto*) and the world has come to imitate plays. Buyō Inshi, 1817¹

Historians have often described kabuki—early modern Japan’s premier form of popular theater—as apolitical although socially disruptive.² Presumably this characterization reflects the fact that kabuki was seldom explicitly oppositional and did not foster the emergence of the sort of revolutionary bourgeoisie demanded by models of national becoming based on European experiences. However, kabuki’s supposed lack of political import is premised upon a circumscribed notion of politics that fails to take into consideration the ways in which culture both sustains and contests hegemony by shaping the categories and practices through which people perceive their world, construct their identities, and conceive their desires. Samurai officials of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries and their critics, by contrast, had little doubt about the political significance of the desires and behaviors incited by kabuki. They took kabuki’s potential for either uplift or destruction of *fūzoku* (customs, public morals) quite seriously and devoted considerable energy to regulating it. Official ideology identified *fūzoku* as crucial indicators of the quality of governance, so threats to well-ordered *fūzoku*, particularly such “vulgar entertainments” as kabuki, were understood to be inherently political.

From the earliest years of the Tokugawa era (1603-1868), kabuki attracted ever greater attention from both audiences and the authorities with its sumptuous displays of eroticism, heroics, scandal, crime, and daily life. While actors and playwrights envisioned their performances as providing *nagusami* (diversion, pleasure, or solace) for audience members, shogunal officials and samurai critics regarded these displays as diverting audiences from their proper social and moral duties. Kabuki’s ability to stir passions drew official reproach but also inspired official hopes that it could become a force for moral reform, as evinced by perennially reissued shogunal directives that kabuki plays “encourage virtue and chastise vice” (*kanzen chōaku*). The determination of officials to **domesticate** kabuki rather than ban it outright, despite their conviction that it had principally pernicious affects on *fūzoku*, attests to their belief in its affective power and the prospects for mobilizing it to affirm officially sanctioned behavior and values.

The power of kabuki, and the nature of the threat that it posed to the political hegemony of Tokugawa authorities, is best understood not simply as “disruptive” but as constitutive. The samurai critic Buyō Inshi’s lament, quoted above, exemplifies this point. In Buyō’s view, the problem was that kabuki no longer merely simulated or

¹ Buyō Inshi, *Seji kenmonroku*, Seia sensho v.14 (Seiabō, 1966), 260.

² See, for example, Donald H. Shively, who asserts that, “censorship eliminated any possibility of writing plays of real social or political significance. The isolated examples that touched on such subjects were intended more to electrify the audience with the playwright’s daring than to influence it with his criticism.” Shively, “Bakufu Versus Kabuki,” reprinted in Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 54.

reflected reality; by the early nineteenth century, reality had come to conform to kabuki's representations. The desires, practices, and ways of viewing the world that kabuki generated did not just *interfere with* the smooth inculcation of officially sanctioned values and behaviors, rather kabuki's ways had *displaced* them in an increasingly broad swath of social and public life. Buyō's litany continues,

In common parlance, something impressive or the clothing of a courtesan [is described as] just like seeing a play. And even when praising the appearance of the high-born, people say seeing [him or her] is like seeing such and such an actor. Even the dignified [manner] of high-ranking authorities of the city magistrate's office or other offices has come to be likened to plays...the habits of speech of actors has become the common speech of the world.³

Buyō's was not a novel complaint. A century earlier, Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728), a prominent Confucian scholar and advisor to a high-ranked shogunal official, warned,

People are easily influenced by the behavior of actors and prostitutes. Recently there has been a tendency for even high-ranking people to use the argot of actors and prostitutes. This habit has become a kind of fashion, and people think that those who do not use such words and phrases are rustics. I am ashamed that this is so. Such a tendency will result in the collapse of the social order.⁴

Kabuki's menace, in the eyes of its critics, was its propensity to inspire imitation, which in turn led fans to develop not just habits of speech but also modes of apprehending the world that displaced or dismissed officially sanctioned habits and world-views.

This essay explores the nature of kabuki's political significance through an analysis of the imitations it inspired. It examines the desires--to dress, act, and speak like actors, or even possess them--that kabuki incited and satisfied, and contrasts those with the official conception of proper social modeling embedded in the concept of *fūzoku*. This comparison illuminates how kabuki offered opportunities for the satisfaction of a broad range of desires, encouraging growing numbers of fans to identify with actors and their depictions of the world, while official understandings of *fūzoku* frustrated the desires and identifications of most people across the social spectrum in Tokugawa Japan.

Official Visions of *Fūzoku* as a Model for Governance and Social Order

Tokugawa rulers promoted a vision of society in which samurai served as moral exemplars. Yet these models of moral righteousness were not to be too closely imitated by commoners, who were expressly denied access to political power and its material symbols. This contradictory logic is evident in the ways officials mobilized the concept of *fūzoku* to define the contours and ideals of the Tokugawa polity. The first Tokugawa

³ Buyō Inshi, *Seji kenmonroku*, Seia sensho v.14 (Seiabō, 1966), 260.

⁴ Earle Ernst, *The Kabuki Theater* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1974), 6.

shoguns inherited rather than invented this term, which originated in ancient China and had been transmitted to ancient Japan along with the Confucian canon. In *The Analects*, Confucius asserted that, “the essence of the gentleman is that of wind (*fū*); the essence of small people [commoners] is that of grass. And when a wind passes over the grass, and it cannot choose but to bend.”⁵ The scholar Xun Zi (ca.298-238 BCE) rephrased Confucius’ statement, explaining that the wind (*fū*) blows upon the common (*zoku*), reforming it as a matter of course. This idea of reform, or “influencing mores and changing customs” in Xun Zi’s famous formulation, came to be inextricably linked with the very etymology of the word *fūzoku* and with Confucian conceptions of good government.⁶ Rather than imposing harsh laws and punishments, virtuous rulers led by example and fostered the spread of proper *fūzoku* among their subjects, thereby creating a well-ordered and harmonious society without resort to outright coercion.

The earliest Tokugawa legal codes incorporated this Confucian ideal of virtuous rule through moral reform by making it a defining duty of samurai. In the 1630 version of the “Laws for Military Houses” (*Buke shohatto*), the first article enjoined warriors to, “cultivate the civil and military arts, make clear human morality, and correct *fūzoku*.”⁷ The primary moral values that samurai were supposed to model for their social inferiors included prudence, self-restraint, diligence, frugality, and filial piety—in the words of a 1702 edict, “people should be prudent in their *fūzoku*, aspire to rectitude, endeavor not to corrupt others’ conduct, and not engage in vulgar entertainments.”⁸ “Vulgar entertainments” such as kabuki performances and carousing in tea houses were exactly the sorts of activities that undermined those values by encouraging lewdness, profligate spending, and neglect of one’s duties and parents. Much of early Tokugawa law is focused on inducing samurai to live up to their responsibilities as exemplary models of proper behavior. Laws demanding that samurai respect distinctions in rank, be frugal in their consumption of clothing and food, and refrain from “vulgar entertainments” abound in the seventeenth century, attesting to the authorities’ determination to transform often unruly idled warriors into paragons of civic virtue.

Given the amount of attention dedicated to this task, one might imagine that samurai officials would welcome the desires and efforts of commoners to emulate samurai. On the contrary, however, authorities went to great lengths to prohibit commoners from imitating the appearance or habits of samurai. This included wearing expensive silk fabrics, studying martial arts, and carrying long swords. A shogunal edict of 1700, for example, prohibits urban commoners (*chōnin*) from wearing the long swords symbolizing samurai status on the grounds that it is, “a *fūzoku* unsuitable for *chōnin*.”⁹ Rural cultivators were also prohibited from adopting the tastes and fashions of their social superiors. Peasants in the northern domain of Tsugaru were not even to wear cotton garments, according to a domainal decree of 1703; only locally produced hemp was deemed appropriate to their status.¹⁰ These sumptuary regulations, expressly

⁵ Confucius, *Analects* (12:19), quoted in Andrew Barclay Chittick, “Pride of Place: The Advent of Local History in Early Medieval China,” diss., University of Michigan, 1997, 14.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Ishii Ryōsuke and Takayanagi Shinzō, eds., *Ofuregaki kanpō shūsei* (Iwanami shoten, 1934), 9.

⁸ Ishii and Takayanagi, eds., *Ofuregaki kanpō shūsei*, 580.

⁹ Ibid., 579.

¹⁰ Namikawa Kenji, “Hoku-Oku ni okeru ‘fūzoku’ to kenryoku,” *Chihōshi kenkyū*, vol.37, no.1 (February 1987), 3-4.

intended to prevent inappropriate imitation, exemplify an alternative official conception of *fūzoku* that coexisted in an uneasy tension with the Confucian version. In this usage, *fūzoku* was understood to designate those practices and moral attitudes that first and foremost distinguished (or were supposed to distinguish) samurai from commoner, and secondarily differentiated various ranks within status groups as well as outcasts from everyone else.

Here the contradictions inherent in these two official Tokugawa understandings of *fūzoku* come to the fore. Unlike the Chinese “gentleman,” a position to which any male in China could in theory aspire, “samurai” had become by the early seventeenth century a legal status that intentionally and permanently excluded the vast majority of the Japanese population.¹¹ The policies implemented by late sixteenth-century warlords of strictly separating warriors from the peasantry (*heinō bunri*) and disarming the peasantry were crucial in facilitating the reunification of the country after more than a century of civil warfare. Depriving their rivals (Buddhist institutions, peasant self-defense leagues) of the means to challenge samurai power while preventing mobility across the warrior-commoner divide, helped aspiring unifiers consolidate their control over their fractious samurai followers and the productive forces of their land in the last decades of the 1600s. The early Tokugawa shoguns institutionalized these trends, and an unambiguous distinction between samurai and the rest of the population became an organizing principle of the Tokugawa order. Tokugawa law and ideology justified the new samurai monopolies over military and formal political power by reference to their mastery of the military and civil arts and promises of benevolent rule. Thus the elevation of samurai to the status of moral exemplar for all of society went hand in hand with the establishment of a much more rigid division between samurai and commoners.

At the same time that samurai authorities were installing the Confucian conception of *fūzoku* at the heart of their legal definitions of samurai status, they were also bringing a whole host of other social groups into the institutional orbit of the state as legally constituted statuses. Over the course of the seventeenth century, all subjects within the realm, from exalted courtiers to clergy to marginal outcast populations, were incorporated into this evolving system. Once firmly established, the system functioned to segregate people spatially and socially, restricting access to office holding, residence, consumption, and leisure pursuits according to status.¹² People were required to perform according to their status positions by rendering service (military, administrative, ritual or labor), paying taxes, and outfitting and comporting themselves according to finely graded sumptuary and domiciliary regulations aimed at making social life an immediately legible manifestation of the political order. In this context, *fūzoku* (in the second sense of various “status-conscious” practices) came to be regarded as visible signs of the state of that order, and therefore of great political significance.

While Tokugawa authorities were busy recognizing various groups as new statuses and codifying the *fūzoku* appropriate to each of them, the forces of urbanization, economic growth, and social mobility that the *Pax Tokugawa* had unwittingly unleashed

¹¹ Samurai status could be conferred, on either a temporary or permanent basis, upon commoners through adoption or as a reward for services rendered to samurai authorities.

¹² For a comprehensive account of the status system in the late Tokugawa period and its dissolution in Meiji, see David Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

were blurring the very distinctions they were so intent on marking. Agricultural expansion, the commercialization of the economy, and the shogunate's construction of an elaborate highway network combined to produce high rates of economic growth as well as new types of wealth less amenable to samurai taxation. These economic changes created new products and appetites, enriched commoner elites, and impoverished most of the samurai class, upsetting the material foundations of the status system. The gradual integration of national markets and the development of a vibrant commercial print culture brought a dizzying array of new goods and pastimes within the reach of a wider range of commoner consumers, while tempting samurai with the pleasures of a lifestyle most could ill afford. Consequently, maintaining status distinctions between samurai and commoners was becoming a Sisyphean task, and a serious concern among officials. In the words of one instruction to inspectors (*meakashi*) in Edo from 1713, "In recent years, the *fūzoku* of the world have daily become in every aspect more elaborate. In addition, the prices of various things have gradually grown high. . . . Long-standing *fūzoku* were heretofore [in accordance with] the rank distinctions of the times; [today] it is clear that there are many behaviors inappropriate to people's status."¹³ These inappropriate *fūzoku* prompted flurries of sumptuary laws designed to enforce people's adherence to the universal values of prudence, duty, and frugality, as well as the distinctions that signaled their accession to the status-based, samurai-dominant premises of the Tokugawa order.

Desire and Frustration in the Status System

Officials' dual understandings of *fūzoku*—one stressing universal moral values and a logic of emulation, and the other signifying particularistic value attributed to specific practices and a logic of differentiation—overlapped and conflicted in complex ways, as seen in the legal uses of *fūzoku*. This duality served to simultaneously incite and thwart commoner desires to imitate samurai. An episode from what is perhaps the most famous Japanese play of all time, *Kanadehon chūshingura* (A Copybook of the Treasury of Loyal Retainers, better known in English as the story of the Forty-seven *Rōnin*), offers a poignant illustration of the dilemma this contradiction poses for the commoner. Act X of the play, originally written for the puppet theater in 1748 then adapted for the kabuki stage, recounts the trials and heroism of the faithful merchant Amakawaya Gihei, who has procured the weapons the *rōnin* (masterless samurai) will need to avenge their master's murder. Doubtful about Gihei's loyalty on account of his being a commoner, the *rōnin* stage a mock police raid on his shop, where he is storing some of their supplies, and demand that he reveal the contents of their trunks. In the course of the raid, the *rōnin* "police" threaten to kill not only Gihei but also his infant son, who happened to be in the shop when the *rōnin* arrive to test Gihei's loyalty. Despite his humble birth, he steadfastly refuses to betray the *rōnin*'s cause. He admits that he does deal in arms but asserts that, "a merchant is [a person] who buys and sells. . . . If I lose my life for [engaging in] business, I will not regret it. So go ahead and kill me!"¹⁴ He throws himself on top of the

¹³ Ishii and Takayanagi, eds., *Ofuregaki kanpō shūsei*, 559.

¹⁴ Takeda Izumo, Miyoshi Shōroku and Namiki Senryū, *Kanadehon chūshingura* (Iwanami Shoten, 1937), available online in Japanese Text Initiative, University of Virginia, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/chushingura/TakKana.html> (accessed February 20, 2007). All following quotes are from this electronic version of the *Kanadon chūshingura*.

trunks and declares, “[You act as if] you are interrogating a woman or a child, taking a hostage. Amakawayu Gihei is a man!” He defiantly dares them to kill the child, and then snatches him back from the “police” and threatens to kill the child himself rather than open the trunks.

At this moment, the leader of the vendetta Yuranosuke emerges from one of the trunks where he has been hiding and apologizes to Gihei for subjecting him to this test of loyalty. Yuranosuke explains that, “Among the forty-odd [*rōnin*], there are those who did not know you and wondered what you, born a merchant, would do if caught and interrogated.” He then praises Gihei by comparing him favorably to samurai. “There is a saying, ‘Among flowers, cherry blossoms [are the best]; and among men, samurai.’ But among samurai, none can match your determination.” This proverb and its invocation here illustrate the pervasiveness of the view of samurai as moral exemplars, as well as its exclusionary effects. Though Yuranosuke, himself a paragon of samurai virtues, declares that Gihei has surpassed all other samurai in his cultivation of the virtues samurai are supposed to represent, this still does not enable Gihei to assume the position of samurai. Indeed, it is perhaps only in a play that the spectacle of samurai so openly valorizing a commoner could be seen.

Gihei graciously accepts Yuranosuke’s apology and then goes on to lament that he cannot join their vendetta as a full-fledged participant. “It is a pitiable thing to be a merchant. If I were even a humble samurai with [a stipend of] only a handful of rice, I would latch on to your sleeves and beg to go with you, just so I could make your tea. But I cannot even do that. It is truly wretched to be a merchant. To bear a debt of gratitude to your master and the authority of the sword, these are things [for samurai] to be grateful for.” Gihei holds dear the values of the samurai, yet must resign himself to his exclusion from meaningful opportunities to demonstrate them. As Donald Keene has noted,

Gihei, the loyal and unselfish merchant, is unable, even in the end, to win this privilege [of dying like a samurai with the others in the vendetta]. The best the samurai avengers can do for him is to use the name of his shop as their password. Gihei’s reaction is not one of indignation that, despite his exemplary services to the league, an accident of birth has deprived him of the chance to die like the others; the most he claims is the recognition that, if not a samurai, he is at least a man.¹⁵

Tokugawa ideology held up samurai as moral exemplars and superior men, thereby encouraging those who wished to identify themselves as “men” to emulate the qualities of samurai. Yet as Gihei’s plight demonstrates, even the most heartfelt and skillful embodiment of samurai virtues fails to win the commoner recognition as a samurai (and therefore as a superior man), a recognition precluded by the fundamental principles of the status-based Tokugawa order. Even becoming the object of samurai admiration and respect (as evinced by Yuranosuke’s florid complements) cannot offer the satisfaction that Gihei fantasizes “even a humble samurai with [a stipend of] only a handful of rice” enjoys as a consequence of samurai status. In fact, for Gihei, the *rōnin*’s doubts about his loyalty and courage call into question his very identity as a “man.” He

¹⁵ Takeda Izumo, Miyoshi Shōraku, and Namiki Senryū, *Chūshingura (A Treasury of Loyal Retainers): A Puppet Play*, Donald Keene, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 18.

must emphatically declare that he **is** a man (*Amakawayaya no Gihei wa otoko de gozaru zo!*), not the woman or child his interrogators seem to be treating him as on account of the status differential between them. His “pitiable” and “wretched” position as a merchant provided no basis for a defense of his identity on other grounds.

While most psychoanalytic theories understand desires as wishes that, by their very nature, cannot be definitively satisfied, my point here is that the desires Tokugawa ideology incited by casting samurai as the ultimate embodiments of valor and virtue were simultaneously foreclosed for over ninety percent of the population who were excluded from the ranks of the samurai status group. This duality certainly served the function of rebounding and shoring up samurai identity at a time when its defining characteristic, military prowess, was not only unneeded but a potential threat to peace and stability. For commoners, however, not only were their desires to identify with and emulate samurai thwarted, but this foreclosure also threatened to undermine other aspects of their identity as well. For the name “samurai” did not just connote a status position or a set of military skills; it was also linked in an elaborate chain of associations to other highly valued qualities. To the extent that such values as manliness, loyalty, and courage were closely associated with the official image of samurai, commoners like Gihei had to struggle for recognition of their own claims to embody those qualities. In light of these frustrations, it is not surprising that commoners increasingly gravitated toward other figures to emulate and identify with, ones that privileged different qualities, transcended status-based limitations, and promised greater satisfaction. These they found on the kabuki stage.

Varieties of Desire and Pleasure in Early Tokugawa Kabuki

As spectators from all sectors of society flocked to kabuki performances, actors, playwrights and theaters were subject to increasingly elaborate regulations aimed at containing the desires and behavior they inspired. The shogunate imposed strict limits on the number and location of theaters, on who could attend performances, on actors’ conduct, and on acceptable subject matter for plays. Many of these edicts were routinely ignored or evaded, but the authorities persisted in their attempts to rein in and harness kabuki throughout the era. In fact, these efforts intensified from the last decade of the eighteenth century onward, as the Tokugawa order began to buckle under the accumulated weight of two centuries of economic, social, and cultural change as well as the rising threat of western imperialism. At stake in this lengthy struggle was whether officially sanctioned or popularly produced models for emulation would prevail in shaping the desires and habits of an ever-broadening segment of the population.

The pleasures kabuki afforded and the desires it incited multiplied and grew more elaborate over time. Initially, the beauty of the actresses and actors—the visual and erotic pleasures their performances afforded (and promised)—were the predominant attraction for spectators. The earliest performances, staged in the first decade of the seventeenth century in dry riverbeds on the outskirts of Kyoto, featured women and youths as well as adult men (all of whom often cross-dressed) performing dances and skits designed to showcase their charms and advertise their sexual services. An account of an early seventeenth century female kabuki performance in Edo describes how, “the high and low thronged to [the theater]” to behold her, gaily dressed as a young man. “[The] outer

corners of her eyes were like the hibiscus, her lips like red flowers. . . . Anyone who would not fall in love with such a beautiful creature is more to be feared than a ghost.”¹⁶ Young male kabuki actors had much the same effect on audiences who, “had their hearts captivated and their souls stolen.”¹⁷ Kabuki performers were so beguiling that, in the words of one 1662 guidebook to the city of Edo, not a few “among the high and low became infatuated with them and thronged and jostled one another in the boxes of the theaters. Still unsatisfied, they constantly engaged them, consummated their trysts, squandered their inheritance, and ruined their names. Some, engaging in brawls and arguments, were taken to court.”¹⁸ These descriptions suggest that in the early years, rather than identifying with and emulating the actors, the desires of early kabuki audience members were focused on gaining access to actors (visually or bodily) in order to satisfy their erotic appetites.

These passions were by no means restricted to male fans. As the seventeenth century wore on, the proportion of women attending kabuki grew, and they, too, became smitten with the actors. A 1705 miscellany reporting on current trends among women asks rhetorically, “Isn’t [kabuki] a licensed quarters [dealing in] males? Women buy both boys (*kodomo*) and actors of male roles (*tachiyaku*), who are made up for their pleasure (*nagusamu mono*).”¹⁹ These female spectators may well have enjoyed their assignations with actors all the more for the opportunities they afforded to take up a position much celebrated in popular fiction and on the kabuki stage but usually reserved for men: that of the connoisseur of erotic pleasures and consumer of sexual services. Whether as patrons of a geisha, the glamorous courtesans in the licensed quarters, or as customers in brothels specializing in handsome youths, usually focused on adult males in the starring role of the desiring subject in the discourse about erotic desire in Tokugawa Japan (*shikidō*).²⁰ Kabuki offered women a chance to indulge themselves in a similar manner, as desiring subjects rather than simply as objects of male desire. The opportunities kabuki provided to satisfy a full range of women’s desires—to pursue their own pleasure, to identify with the glamorous *onnagata* (male female-role specialists), and to feel sought after themselves—combined to turn a growing number of women of both samurai and commoner backgrounds into avid kabuki fans.

Official Efforts to Quarantine Kabuki and Its Affects

Contravening the officially sanctioned values of frugality, diligence, and (female) chastity to pursue desires for erotic pleasure or romance would have been reason enough for the authorities to rein in kabuki. But it was the more immediate threat to public peace

¹⁶ Donald Shively, “Bakufu Versus Kabuki,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 18, no.3/4 (Dec., 1955), 328.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁸ Asai Ryōi, *Edo meishoki*, quoted in Shively, “Bakufu Versus Kabuki,” 329.

¹⁹ Nishiki Bunryū, *Tōsei otome ori*, quoted in Mitamura Engyō, *Shibai fūzoku* (Chūō kōronsha, 1999), 27-8.

²⁰ See Gregory Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 27-9 for a discussion of the “way of eros” as a masculinist discourse.

that seems to have initially propelled the shogunate into action. Kabuki's bewitching beauties inspired violent passions among their audiences, and these soon lead to frequent fights over the merits and favors of favorite performers. Unlike a desire to emulate, which could find validation and reinforcement in being shared with others, the desire to "have" produced rivalries and aggression. This brawling posed a direct threat to public order at a time when thousands of military men, idled by the *Pax Tokugawa*, thronged to kabuki performances in search of diversion, and possibly trouble as well. Deprived of opportunities to prove their mettle on the battlefield, kabuki performances may also have been an arena for satisfying desires for tests of honor that could shore up warrior identities not yet resigned to the new official conception of samurai as moral exemplars.²¹

To prevent kabuki's charms from derailing official efforts to inculcate new status-based identifications and behaviors among both samurai and commoners, the shogunate moved quickly to blunt its appeal by targeting the main attractions, the performers themselves. First, they instituted a ban on female kabuki actors in 1629. While this ban had to be repeated for the next three decades, eventually it drove women from the kabuki stage. A second ban on youth performers imposed in 1652 had similar motivations. Young actors were forced to shave their alluring forelocks and assume the status of adult males if they were to continue to appear on stage. But this attempt to quell audience desires by depriving youth actors of the most potent sign of their appeal and availability foundered within a few years, as the purple caps and kerchiefs these actors took to wearing to obscure their shorn pates became as erotically charged as their forelocks had once been.²² Yet these restrictions had productive rather than simply repressive effects, contributing to the emergence of new objects of desire and new sources of pleasure in theater performances.²³ Many former youth performers turned their talents to playing female roles as *onnagata* and eventually developed dazzling new modes of representing femininity on stage. While initially *onnagata* preserved a somewhat androgynous aesthetic derived from their experience in youth kabuki, by the early eighteenth century they came to epitomize feminine beauty and elegance.²⁴ Not surprisingly, *onnagata* were soon in as much demand as erotic objects as female performers had been.

Shogunal officials buttressed these ineffectual initiatives to diminish the appeal of actors with policies to regulate attendance and the spaces associated with kabuki. These policies were designed to prevent the effacement and inversions of status boundaries that kabuki occasioned. Kabuki confounded the status system's logic of partitioning of the populace by drawing avid fans from all status groups and uniting them in shared sets of

²¹ See Eiko Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), especially 151-7, 197-222.

²² See Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, 112-20.

²³ Both Shively and Donald Keene describe the shogunate's repressive measures as productive in the sense of having had a salutary effect on the artistic merits of kabuki. See Keene, *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600-1867, A History of Japanese Literature*, volume 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 234. By contrast, I use the term "productive" here in the Foucauldian sense to emphasize the ways that suppression incites rather than forecloses desires. See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. 1: Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

²⁴ Maki Morinaga, "The Gender of the Onnagata As the Imitating Imitated: Its Historicity, Performativity, and Involvement in the Circulation of Femininity," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, v.10, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 257.

desires, dispositions, and aesthetic tastes.²⁵ Given that kabuki actors had been officially assigned to the status of an outcast group referred to as *hinin* (literally ‘non-person’), the social standing they acquired on account of being the objects of fans’ adoration turned the organizing principles of the status system on their head. The desires kabuki actors excited among fans endowed these lowly performers with a measure of power over their social superiors. The affront that this illicit power presented to official notions of proper social order was recorded in a 1662 Edo guidebook.

Even though the lineage of every one of the youths was extremely base, these beautiful youths were respected by the stupid; they flapped about like kites and owls and going into the presence of the exalted, befouled [that] presence; and these were scoundrels who, saying insolent things as it pleased them, ruined men and held them in contempt . . . they polluted the high-born on the sly.²⁶

Samurai attendance at kabuki performances was repeatedly proscribed, but the lure of the theater was too powerful to deter many samurai fans.²⁷ Kabuki actors were also expressly forbidden to attend parties at the mansions of upper-ranking samurai, where they were in great demand. Since shogunal efforts to curtail kabuki’s influence on samurai focused most intensely on the highest ranks, low-ranking samurai merely donned simple disguises and left their swords at home when attending performances. From bans on the construction of latticed boxes that concealed the identities of their occupants to edicts forbidding the daughters and wives of high-ranking samurai families from waiting in their palanquins outside theaters in hopes of catching a glimpse of famous actors, the shogunate imposed a host of restrictions on samurai, whose enthusiasm for kabuki and infatuations with actors made a mockery of their newly established duty to serve as moral exemplars.²⁸

In keeping with the logic of segregation that informed the status system, the shogunate issued edicts designed to quarantine theaters and actors so as to contain their influence. Kabuki theaters, lumped together with the brothel districts in major cities, were labeled *akusho* (bad places, places of vice) and subjected to elaborate regulations. Beginning in the 1660s, the shogunate placed limits on the number of large theaters in the major cities (only four were allowed in Edo, for example), and relegated them to specific sections of the cities. These new theater districts also became home to kabuki actors, who were obliged to live there and whose movements outside the districts were subject to various restrictions. Actors’ attempts at disguising themselves in townsman’s garb in order to sneak out of the theater district were noted and prohibited.²⁹

²⁵ For an interesting recent discussion of this process, see Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 263-71.

²⁶ Shively, “Bakufu Versus Kabuki,” 331.

²⁷ See Andrew Gerstle, “Flowers of Edo,” *Asian Theater Journal* 4 (Spring 1987), reprinted in Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), for a discussion of samurai patronage of kabuki in the eighteenth century.

²⁸ Shively, 344.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 343-4.

These attempts at containing kabuki's influence within the geographic and status-based boundaries defined by the authorities failed miserably because they were unable to check the other forms of desire that kabuki incited—audiences' desires to be (like) actors themselves. As fans increasingly took on the fashions, habits, mannerisms, speech, and even the acting styles of the performers they admired,³⁰ the divisions between theater and street, actor and spectator, play and daily life became increasingly blurred. Already in the late seventeenth century, kabuki fans, aided by enterprising merchants, were eagerly imitating the costumes and hairstyles of famous actors, so that actors' kimono patterns and coiffures soon came to define the cutting edge of fashion.³¹ One 1692 guide to beauty, health, etiquette, and culture for women remarked that, "all the *fūzoku* considered trendy among the middle and lower classes of the capital—from clothing patterns and styles to the ways of tying sashes—are learned from kabuki *onnagata*."³² The comic fiction author Ejima Kiseki (1667-1736) noted how women's imitations of kabuki actors were eroding standards of proper conduct. "These days . . . neither mothers nor daughters behave with modesty. They ape the manners of harlots and courtesans, and of *onnagata*" by tying "their girdles high," wearing "masculine-style sleeves," and walking "with a seductive gait."³³

Kabuki's Inversions and the Deterioration of *Fūzoku*

That this tendency of spectators to model themselves on actors was displacing the official logic of emulation that held up samurai as the ultimate models was not lost on officials and critics. In 1727 Ogyū Sorai decried the fact that *fūzoku* were everywhere in flux and disarray, reaching crisis proportions. "As manners and *fūzoku* keep on changing, the levels of proper status keep changing with them. These changes take place as it pleases the lower classes."³⁴ But commoners were not, in Sorai's eyes, truly responsible for this sorry state of affairs. Rather, "the blame rests ultimately with the authorities," whose own *fūzoku* have, "deteriorated in recent times."³⁵ The inversion of the official logic of emulation led not only to luxurious living and a lack of proper respect for superiors, but to physical debility as well. "That people today are feeble, no one more so than a *daimyō* (high-ranking samurai lord), is all owing to the prevalent trends and *fūzoku*."³⁶ For Sorai, fans' shared set of desires and their incorporation of kabuki-inspired *fūzoku* into their daily lives did not merely undermine the hierarchy of status differences that was

³⁰ For a discussion of kabuki actors' influence on fashion and deportment in the eighteenth century, see Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 88-111.

³¹ For an informative account of the influence of kabuki on Edo hairstyles, see Kanazawa Yasutaka, *Edo keppatsushi*, revised ed., (Tokyo: Seiabō, 1998), especially 21-24. For an amusing account of how the kimono pattern of an actor's costume came to bear his name and became the height of fashion, see Mitamura, *Shibai fūzoku*, 38-9.

³² *Onna hochoki*, quoted in Mitamura, 26.

³³ Quoted in Howard Hibbett, "Ejima Kiseki (1667-1736) and His Katagi-mono," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.14, no. 3/4 (Dec., 1951), 421.

³⁴ Olof G. Lidin, *Ogyū Sorai's Discourse on Government (Seidan): an Annotated Translation* (Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), 146.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

supposed to structure the body politic; their upending of the proper order of emulation (of superiors by their inferiors) threatened the health and integrity of bodies themselves.

As Sorai's critique makes clear, samurai were far from immune to kabuki's power despite their officially lofty position. Even those samurai occupying the highest rungs of the status order were drawn to kabuki. A shogunal ordinance of 1743 states that, "There are reports that daimyō and their stewards meet at tea houses and attend lewd entertainments. This must stop."³⁷ In the late eighteenth century elite, samurai passion for kabuki continued to be the object of satires and conservative dismay. In 1798, one shogunal official denounced the spectacle of "high [Tokugawa] officials mimicking riverbed beggars [a derogatory term for kabuki actors],"³⁸ which was all too common before the shogunate's Kansei Reforms in the 1790s forced high-ranking samurai to become more discreet in their appreciation of kabuki.

These reforms, designed by the shogunal official Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758-1829), aimed primarily at shoring up government finances, suppressing "heterodoxy" and enforcing his vision of Confucian orthodoxy. Yet Sadanobu was also very concerned with reforming *fūzoku* and curbing illicit consumption among all segments of society that, in his view, undermined samurai authority and corroded the status order. He reasserted the importance of the official definition of *fūzoku* as a logic of emulation, even in the face of ample indications that it was not the *fūzoku* of the samurai that people were imitating. "People [naturally] follow the ruler's preferences without being ordered to do so. Accordingly, this is called *fū*. In the places that the *fū* (wind) reaches, [these preferences] naturally become the common practices. This is called *zoku*. Thus looking at the *fūzoku* of a state [or domain], one can see the likes and dislikes of the ruler."³⁹ *Fūzoku* had to be reformed because they represented the ruler's designs for the social order, and clearly, the state of *fūzoku* in the late eighteenth century did not communicate the message rulers desired to send. Considered a primary cause of the decline of *fūzoku*, kabuki figured prominently in Sadanobu's assessment of the ills afflicting society. He singled out high-ranking samurai enamored of kabuki as objects of satire in his own comic fiction.⁴⁰ But kabuki actors were primary targets of his reforming zeal. Actors' salaries were capped, their predilections for ostentatious display in clothing and luxurious recreation condemned, and their interaction with samurai further curtailed.⁴¹ This reliance on the same strategies of containment and curbs on actors' habits ensured that the Kansei reforms would be no more successful in reining in kabuki than earlier official efforts had been. That official reform efforts had fallen woefully short was painfully clear to critics like Buyō Inshi. He complained that, "The authorities say [the word] reform, but [their policies] begin and end with just [invoking] that name."⁴²

³⁷ Ibid, 581.

³⁸ Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 100.

³⁹ Nakamura Shunsaku, "Fūzoku ron e no shikaku," *Shisō*, no.766 (April 1988), 105.

⁴⁰ See Haruko Iwasaki, "Portrait of a Daimyo: Comical Fiction by Matsudaira Sadanobu," in *Monumenta Nipponica* 38-1 (spring 1983), 1-48.

⁴¹ See Katherine Saltzman-Li, "The Tsurane of Shibaraku: Communicating the Power of Identity" in Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 253-68.

⁴² Buyō Inshi, *Seji kenmonroku*, Seia sensho v.14 (Seiabō, 1966), 257.

Desire and Emulation in Late Tokugawa Kabuki

Buyō observed that, “Townsmen, idlers (*yūmin*), and the like love kabuki actors exceedingly, though samurai not as much. [Actors] elicit the devotion particularly of women and girls, and are held in high esteem by them. Drawn in by the devotion of women and girls, men favor kabuki actors as well.”⁴³ While intended as a criticism, this description of the desires that kabuki actors and fans inspired is quite instructive. Fans may fall in love with the actors, may esteem them (and therefore emulate them), or may love those who love actors (and therefore emulate them to be loved as well). This mapping of the economy of desires is echoed in other depictions of late Tokugawa kabuki.

The famous humorist Shikitei Sanba’s (1776-1822) comic overview of Edo kabuki audiences, *Sanshibai kyakusha hyōbanki* (Guide to Audiences of the Three Theaters, 1811), for example, presents a vivid survey of the disparate desires spectators conceived and satisfied through kabuki performances. Sanba identifies a number of “types” among the audience—the Play Lover, the Mimic, and the Actor Wannabe—and ranks them in the manner of the popular annual rankings of kabuki actors (*yakusha hyōbanki*). Occupying the top spot on Sanba’s list are the die-hard fans (*hiike jōren*), whom he describes as “the [essential] foundation of theaters’ prosperity and an actor’s rise to fame.”⁴⁴ They attended performances of their favorite actor religiously, organized themselves into fan clubs, and exerted increasing influence over theatrical matters through their financial contributions to actors and theaters. They actively participated in performances not only by having their gifts prominently displayed on the stage or used as props in performances, but also by calling out carefully timed encouragement to actors during the plays, donning their own special costumes, and performing elaborate clapping routines at ceremonial theater events.⁴⁵ Die-hard fans expressed their love for the actors, and admiration for their skills by supporting them financially and emotionally. They also bonded with like-minded fans in fan clubs. Furthermore, they were able to capture some of the actors’ glamour and fans’ attention for themselves by developing their own types of performance that came to be integrated into the theatergoing experience itself. Performances by actors thus also served as occasions for performances by spectators, rendering hazy the boundary between them. In this sense, the die-hard fan was able to become a performer him or herself, rather than simply admire one from afar.

Even fans less dedicated than the die-hards got in on the act by treating a trip to the theater as an opportunity to show themselves off. Some wealthy female spectators took advantage of the many intermissions to “change their clothes so often that one wonders if *they* are putting on a show for the actors.”⁴⁶ These changes often exhibited a costume-like quality in that they were intended to evoke the image of various stock characters in kabuki plays, such as a geisha or court lady. In fact, Jacob Raz notes that

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁴⁴ Shikitei Sanba, *Sanshibai kyakusha hyōbanki*, in Geinōshi kenkyūkai, ed., *Nihon shomin bunka shiryō shūsei*, v.6: *Kabuki* (Sanichi shobō, 1973), 499.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the activities of kabuki fan clubs, see Susumu Matsudaira, “*Hiike Renchū* (Theatre Fan Clubs) in Osaka in the Early Nineteenth Century,” in Samuel Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 112-22.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Jacob Raz, *Audience and Actors: A Study of their Interaction in the Japanese Traditional Theater* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 177.

these clothing changes were described using the term, *'hayagawari'* (quick change), used for the stage technique of lightning-quick costume changes that allowed an actor to demonstrate his virtuosity in playing several different characters in one play. Whether these women were actually trying to outdo the actors or attract their (or other spectators') erotic interest is unclear, but kabuki provided opportunities to indulge their desires to dress beautifully and be appreciated by people who presumably shared their aesthetic tastes.

Hoping to capitalize on their resemblance to particular actors and thereby attract lovers, Sanba's actor wannabes (*yakusha kidori*) assiduously "mimic every detail, from the tastes and appearance to the voice and intonation of the actor they are said to resemble."⁴⁷ Sanba mocks the wannabe as, "Someone who tries to be a sex symbol but isn't sexy, who [acts like] romantic hero but is actually a dud--this is the special art of the actor wannabe."⁴⁸ He is a kabuki-inspired dandy who, "brings his own special hair oil by the barbershop, bathes twice at the public bath with special soap powder . . . changes into a lightweight cotton robe and returns to the barbershop to have two or three straggling hairs carefully smoothed down . . ." ⁴⁹ Bringing the style, speech habits, and deportment of actors into their daily lives, wannabes continued their "performances" long after kabuki theaters had closed for the evening.

Another of Sanba's types pushed this mimicry to even greater extremes. Ranked somewhat lower than die-hard fans but seemingly no less avid, mimics "go to the theater every day" and copy the gestures and expressions of the performers, "staring when the actor on the stage stares, turning their heads when he turns his head, giving their undivided attention to trying to mimic [the actor] without caring that neighboring spectators think they are crazy."⁵⁰ Mimics also formed themselves into clubs and practiced their skills regularly. "Night after night, they walk around the neighborhood practicing [their imitations]," gradually progressing from back streets to main thoroughfares as their skills increased.⁵¹ This mimicry not only makes it difficult to distinguish between actor and spectator, but also between the theater and other public spaces. Like the wannabe, the mimic brought kabuki onto the streets of neighborhoods far removed from the licensed theater districts and confounded the efforts of samurai officials to contain kabuki's affects by restricting the locations of theaters and regulating the lives of those labeled "actors."

Sanba's work illustrates the desires and mechanisms through which kabuki increasingly came to permeate daily life well beyond the confines of the theaters' walls. It also exemplifies another mode through which kabuki's appeal and aesthetics reached into people's daily lives: woodblock print culture. Sanba wrote extensively of the theater, set his comic fiction in the theater, and even devised a number of innovative punctuation-like symbols to re-create in text form the aural conventions of kabuki performances.⁵² Many genres of popular fiction featured kabuki as a setting or borrowed extensively from its repertoire of plots and characters. Thus even people who could not afford or lived too

⁴⁷ Shikitei Sanba, *Sanshibai yakusha hyōbanki*, 510.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Barbara Cross, "Representing Performance In Japanese Fiction: Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822)," *SOAS Literary Review AHRB Centre Special Issue* (Autumn 2004).

far away to attend actual performances, could still partake of its pleasures and be stirred by its attractions. In addition to (and often in conjunction) with textual representations, actor portraits (*yakusha-e*) were another widely circulating element that disseminated kabuki culture throughout Japan. Prints featuring actors had become popular souvenirs as early as the end of the seventeenth century. They offered fans of a particular play or actor a means of enjoying a spectral form of “possessing” the actor’s body that was both much cheaper and more enduring than a fleeting assignation or watching a performance. For fans who could not know too much about their favorite, or who aspired to become one of Sanba’s mimics, there were a variety of publications that described actors’ “voices, accents, postures, gestures, movements, attire and ornaments” in detail and instructed their readers in mimicry using lines from kabuki plays.⁵³ Given the wide variety of media, from fashion to woodblock prints, through which kabuki’s appeal was transmitted throughout Japanese society—not to mention the host of agents (only a minority of whom were officially regarded as actors) who performed that transmission—it is no surprise that officials were unable to contain kabuki’s influence through their narrowly defined strategy of quarantining theaters and actors.

Competing Logics and Unruly Desires

The dismal record of this strategy seems to have made little impression on late Tokugawa officials intent on restoring the proper status order through disciplining kabuki. The high priority granted *fūzoku* reform became even more prominent in the Tempō reforms of the early 1840s.⁵⁴ The new restrictions imposed on kabuki were quite severe. The shogunate forced all three Edo kabuki theaters to relocate to the outskirts of the city (present-day Asakusa) to curb their influence on *fūzoku*, initially with economically disastrous effects. Shrine theaters, the second tier of smaller theaters, were abolished outright. In addition to theaters, the reforms also targeted actors directly, requiring that they wear braided hats that hid their faces when they went out in public and prohibiting their tours in the provinces.⁵⁵ To curb their high-flying lifestyles, the shogunate instituted a new cap on actors’ salaries, and Ichikawa Danjūrō VII (1791-1859), Edo’s most famous actor at the time, was banished from the city because of his luxurious habits. Other well-known actors, such as Nakamura Tomijūrō II, endured similar exiles.⁵⁶ Shogunal officials’ concerted efforts to contain kabuki’s influence caused significant hardships for actors, playwrights and theater owners but did little to shore up the crumbling social order and restore proper *fūzoku*.

These reformist political programs foundered on numerous accounts, but one of them was their inability to bring *fūzoku* into conformity with the official ideal that had invested *fūzoku* with weighty significance as an indicator of the virtue and legitimacy of the samurai rule. The culture of the kabuki theater, with its glamorous stars and

⁵³ Morinaga, “The Gender of the Onnagata,” 271.

⁵⁴ Haga Noboru, *Edo jōhō bunkashi kenkyū* (Kōseisha, 1996), 154. Haga argues that an overweening emphasis on *fūzoku* reform was a distinguishing feature of the Tempō reforms, setting them apart from the shogunate’s earlier reform efforts.

⁵⁵ Haga, *Edo jōhō bunkashi* 158.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

widespread appeal, was infinitely more successful in inspiring imitation and shaping *fūzoku* than official ideology, even in the face of continual interference and suppression by the state.

Thus Kabuki's political import can be more fruitfully grasped not in reference to whether it generated plays that critiqued samurai authority or glorified commoner values in ways that contributed to the overthrow the Tokugawa regime in the 1860s, but in terms of how the desires and material affects it fostered displaced and destabilized official conceptions of the social order and directed people's desires away from the goals sanctioned by the state. Kabuki not only elicited stronger passions than the ideals of modesty, frugality, propriety, and diligence that authorities advocated, but it guided fans' desires toward the ends of erotic satisfaction, consumption, status-blind identification, and aesthetic appreciation that directly contravened those values. If we are to take culture seriously as force in history without falling into cultural essentialism, then we need to develop a clearer understanding of the economies of desire and identification that cultural discourses and practices generate and endeavor to satisfy. Only then can we begin to see how they reinforce or subvert the desires and identities that make hegemony possible in any particular historical context.