



R. Keller Kimbrough, trans., *Wondrous Brutal Fictions: Eight Buddhist Tales from the Early Japanese Puppet Theater*
 New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 288 pages. \$55.00.
 ISBN 978-0-231-14658-6.

ANY STUDENT or scholar of Japanese literature or drama will know something about the *jōruri* puppet theater (now known as *bunraku*), be it the plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1754), often considered the greatest playwright of the genre if not of Japanese theater in general, or the masterpieces of the golden age of *jōruri* (c. 1730–1760) such as *Sugawara denju tenarai lagami* (Sugawara’s secrets of calligraphy, 1746) and *Kanadehon Chūshingura* (The treasury of loyal retainers, 1748), which, like many successful *jōruri* plays of the period, also became staples of the kabuki repertoire. Thanks to the work of Donald KEENE (1961) and C. Andrew GERSTLE (2001), the *jōruri* of Chikamatsu in particular has long been accessible to English-language readers. Chikamatsu is not only recognized for the introduction of the “contemporary-life play” (*sewamono*) into *jōruri*, he is credited with revolutionizing the genre itself. Modern scholars have seen fit to make a distinction between *jōruri* proper and the early period of the genre, which has come to be known as *ko-jōruri* (old *jōruri*). The dividing line is considered to be the play *Shusse Kagekiyo* (Kagekiyo victorious), written by Chikamatsu in 1685 for the chanter Takemoto Gidayū (1651–1714).

This focus on Chikamatsu and the relegation of all that came before him to a sub-category has meant that the early history of *jōruri* has remained a territory little explored, save by a small number of specialists. In English, the only monograph on the subject is Charles J. DUNN's *The Early Japanese Puppet Drama* (1966), published almost a half-century ago. ISHII's study (1989) of the related genre of *sekkyō-bushi* subsequently added greatly to our knowledge of the puppet theater of the early and mid seventeenth century. Dunn's work introduces only two pieces in full translation, however, and Ishii's contains only short summaries of five key *sekkyō* texts, leaving the reader hungry for more examples of these fascinating narratives.

Now in R. Keller Kimbrough's *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* the reader has eight full translations of texts of the early puppet theater. The pieces are: *Sanshō dayū*, *Karukaya*, *Shintokumaru*, *Oguri*, *Sayohime*, *Aigo-no-waka*, *Amida no munewari* (Amida's Riven Breast), and *Goō-no-hime*. The text of the earliest, *Karukaya*, dates from 1631, while the latest plays translated are from editions of the 1670s. As Kimbrough explains in his introduction, the commercial puppet theater in the seventeenth century consisted of two streams. The one now referred to as *ko-jōruri* arose from earlier story-telling and puppetry traditions, which with the addition of the recently imported *shamisen* for musical accompaniment coalesced at the beginning of the Edo period into a popular entertainment. The other, *sekkyō* or *sekkyō-bushi*, emerged from a tradition of lay Buddhist story-telling focused on, as Kimbrough puts it, "the workings of karma and the miraculous origins of celebrity Buddhist icons" (1). Sometime around the beginning of the seventeenth century, the performers of these "sermon ballads," as the term *sekkyō-bushi* is often translated, also began using puppets to illustrate their narratives. At first various instruments were used as musical accompaniment, but eventually *sekkyō* performances, too, adopted the *shamisen*. For decades the two arts competed with one another, as is illustrated in the present work's introduction by the reproduction of woodblock prints showing *ko-jōruri* and *sekkyō* theaters side by side in the theatre districts of both Edo and Kyoto in the 1660s (4–5).

Eventually, especially after the development of the new, more secular *jōruri* represented by the plays of Chikamatsu, the *sekkyō* tradition went into decline and in the eighteenth century ceased to exist altogether. During the period covered by these translations, however, *sekkyō* was very much *ko-jōruri*'s rival. This is also reflected in the newly-arisen phenomenon of theater-related publications. By the 1630s the texts of both *ko-jōruri* and *sekkyō* plays were being published in so-called *shōhon* ("true text") editions, that is, purported faithful copies of the version used by the chanter himself in performance. Since the two traditions shared narratives and over time the performance styles began to merge, it is often difficult to determine whether a text should be classified as *ko-jōruri* or *sekkyō*. Of the eight plays translated in this collection, only two, *Amida no munewari* (1651) and *Goō-no-hime* (1673), can be regarded with any certainty as *ko-jōruri* texts. One, *Aigo-no-waka*,

occupies a position somewhere between the two traditions, while the others are considered by most scholars to be mainstays of the *sekkyō* repertoire.

The works translated bear unmistakable traces of an earlier oral tradition. Several of the narratives employ the same formulaic beginning, and the same stock scenes or devices are used in a number of different plays. They also all abound in miracles, acts of devotion, and divine retribution. On this score, the tales reflect “the composite nature of late medieval Japanese religious culture, which tended to constitute an amalgam of diverse and occasionally incompatible ingredients rather than an organized or internally consistent universe of practice and belief” (16). Several of the main characters are born as a result of supplications to deities. Their stories may be motivated by filial piety or extreme dedication to their own enlightenment. There are appeals to the mercy of Amida Buddha, the bodhisattvas Kannon and Jizō, and to the power of the *Lotus Sutra*. The characters may also face the stern but just King Enma of the underworld. More often than not, they try to make sense of their fate through recourse to the notion of karma. After death, several of them are said to have become the gods of particular shrines.

But there is more to the tales than this. For the modern reader, especially, the inconsistent religious messages in what are sometimes considered didactic narratives suggest that there is something else going on here. For one thing, all of the tales are also about family and personal relationships. Many of the characters act out of filial piety, but there are also cases of devoted sisters (*Sanshō dayū*), wives (*Shintokumaru*, *Oguri*), and vassals (*Goō-no-hime*) who sacrifice much in order to come to the aid of their brothers, husbands, or hereditary lords. As Kimbrough’s title indicates, there is also much brutality and violence. In *Sanshō dayū* two siblings are separated from their mother and sold into slavery. The son escapes, but the daughter is tortured to death for her role in helping her brother get away. Eventually, with the help of the Jizō he worships, the boy manages to find his mother and restore the family fortunes. He then seeks his revenge on the slave traders and slave owner. Both *Shintokumaru* and *Aigo-no-Waka* are subjected to cruel treatment by their mother-in-laws. The former is inflicted with a powerful curse which leaves him a blind leper, while the latter is tortured, forced to flee, and eventually takes his own life. And for her role in helping Yoshitsune avoid capture by the enemy Taira clan, *Goō-no-hime* is subjected to eight different kinds of torture, including both freezing and boiling water, having arrows screwed into her joints, and being roasted over a fire.

As Kimbrough notes, in many of these narratives it is physically vulnerable women and children who suffer the most cruel and painful fates, and thus the stories, on one level at least, can be said to celebrate their “psychological strength and the power of human will” (17). But they also suggest other concerns, including the “fundamental human fear of bodily destruction” (17) and an anxiety about sexual predation. In *Amida no munewari*, two siblings decide to sell themselves in order to raise funds to hold a memorial service for their parents. The daughter is purchased by a man who needs the liver of a young girl to cure his son’s illness. In *Sayohime*,

the title heroine likewise sells herself in order to hold services for her father. She is bought by a man whose turn it is to provide the virgin sacrifice to the giant serpent that has taken over the local lake. The sexual symbolism inherent in the devouring of virgin organs or bodies is not lost on Kimbrough, who makes reference to Freud's theory of "cannibalistic pregenital sexual organization" to explain the common metaphor in myth and fairy-tale by which devouring stands for sex (14).

Regardless of how one wants to read these "wondrous brutal fictions," we are indebted to Kimbrough for having these very readable translations of eight examples of the genre. The translations are annotated, with some tales accompanied by as many as sixty footnotes. Most have far less, however, and on the whole there is a good balance between readability and scholarly apparatus. The translations, moreover, are illustrated, with each one including a number of reproductions of illustrated pages from the original texts. In addition to the introduction and the translations themselves, there is a short glossary, a bibliography, and two appendices, one providing information on the major *sekkyō* chanters of the period, and the other a listing of the sources of the translations and of other extant versions of the plays. All of this is extremely useful, not only for would-be scholars of Japan's pre-modern puppet theatre, but also for students of related narrative and performance traditions.

If I have a criticism, it is with the present volume's rather limited scope. As Kimbrough's subtitle indicates, this is a collection of "eight Buddhist tales from the early Japanese puppet theater." As such, it draws mainly from the body of *sekkyō* texts, which are marked not only by characteristic linguistic and textual features, but also by the dominance of popular religious beliefs and motifs. As a representation of the "early Japanese puppet theater," although this collection connects that theater with the medieval narrative traditions of *setsuwa* and *otogizōshi*, it provides little in the way of linkage—either through the selection of plays or in the introduction—with the subsequent mainstream *jōruri* and *kabuki* theaters. For later developments, it was undeniably *ko-jōruri* rather than *sekkyō* that was more important. The *ko-jōruri* repertoire includes, in addition to works which share the popular religious orientation of *sekkyō*, other plays, such as *Takadachi*, *Yashima*, and *Kosode Soga*, all of which are set in the samurai world of the Gempei wars (late twelfth century), and the plays *Hanaya* and *Aguchi no hangan*, early examples of the genre of *oiemono*, that is, plays dealing with attempted usurpation of a feudal house. The *oiemono* was to become the dominant play-type of the *kabuki* of the Kamigata (Kyoto/Osaka) region during the Genroku era (1688–1704). Early *jōruri* also includes the tradition of *Kinpira jōruri*, the stories of which are based on the exploits of the legendary warrior Kinpira and his companions. Many scholars acknowledge *Kinpira jōruri* as a major influence on the development of Edo *kabuki*, particularly as represented by the *aragoto* (rough business) acting style associated with the Ichikawa Danjūrō acting line.

It is perhaps asking too much of the present work that it also cover this side of the early puppet theater. In practical terms, it would require some adjustments or additions to the selection of plays translated as well as an expanded introduction.

Kimbrough has been most active as a scholar of medieval religious literature, and his erudition is evident in these excellent translations of the *sekkyō* classics. Hopefully, we will someday have a collection *ko-jōruri* plays in translation of similar high quality.

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