

Nishikawa Sukenobu: One Hundred Women, Two Stories, and a Reconsideration

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In 1911 the journalist and fierce enemy of censorship, Miyatake Gaikotsu 宮武外骨 (1867–1955), rescued some old references about the publication ban, in 1723, of a purportedly erotic sequel to the book *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*, by the famous Kyoto artist Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671–1750).¹ Those references apparently turn this book into one of the first and rare examples of direct Edo period prohibition of sexually explicit material. Miyatake explores some other important cases in his *Hikka shi* 筆禍史.² Yet, despite the many years that have passed since 1911, until now this particular episode has been dismissed, probably because of issues with credibility regarding Miyatake himself and the uncertainties about the existence of copies of the erotic book in question.

However, is Miyatake's argument really so baseless? What are the sources that Miyatake uses in his attempt to historicize the censorship of publications in Japan? Is it possible to find suitable candidates occupying the same position as that "erotic book"? Can we discern reasons behind control of this type of production, and, particularly, this specific book? What peculiarities could this material have had to provoke such a strong reaction on the part of bakufu censorship authorities? This article will examine those sources and will search for clues which offer insight into the case, taking advantage of the extant copies of Sukenobu's books now in various *shunga* collections. Our main interest is to ascertain the core causes of bakufu reaction against Sukenobu, his editor Hachimonjiya, and his erotic book (*shunpon* 春本) production.

Keywords: censorship, Edo period, erotic prints, Nishikawa Sukenobu, popular culture, publishing industry, *shunga*, ukiyo-e

1 I would like to thank C. Andrew Gerstle and Timothy Clark, as well as the anonymous reader, for reading this article and commenting on it.

2 Miyatake 1911a. Miyatake Gaikotsu was a journalist and media historian who wrote extensively about customs and social conditions of the Edo and Meiji periods. Famous for his efforts towards the establishment of freedom of speech in Japan, he also published significantly against corruption and bureaucracy. Together with *Hikka shi*, Miyatake published many articles critical of the Meiji political situation in *Kokkei shinbun* 滑稽新聞. This newspaper, created by Miyatake himself in 1901, was banned in October 1908. He was also active in writing against the new category of obscenity (*waisetsu* 猥褻) implemented by Meiji authorities, for example publishing *Waisetsu fūzoku shi* 猥褻風俗史 (1911) and *Waisetsu to kagaku* 猥褻と科学 (1924) (comp. in Miyatake 1994, vol. 5).

Nishikawa Sukenobu 西川祐信 is regarded as one of the most significant ukiyo-e designers and illustrators from the first half of the Edo period, but we know very little about him, since only limited research has been so far published.³

Sukenobu, a Kyoto artist, was born in 1671, and from a very young age he studied with the famous painting schools of Kanō 狩野 and Tosa 土佐, although he determined to adopt the new ukiyo-e style, to which belong most of his prolific printed production, as well as his paintings, particularly of women. The beginnings of his work as a book illustrator can be identified by the end of the Genroku 元禄 era (1688–1704), when he became associated with the well known publishing house of Hachimonjiya 八文字屋, for whom it is known that he produced a large quantity of designs.

Another distinctive aspect of Sukenobu's oeuvre are his erotic books, which were so popular that the term *Nishikawa-e* 西川絵, or “Nishikawa pictures” became synonymous with *makura-e* 枕絵 (“pillow pictures,” i.e. erotica). It is assumed that his production of erotic books must have been quite high, but not much is known about it today. There is still considerable debate concerning the attribution to Sukenobu of erotic books. Many have no signature, and it is hard to locate extant copies.

Returning to our initial comments, and not just trusting Miyatake blindly, let us first confirm his sources; the writer Baba Bunkō 馬場文耕 (1715–1759), and the nineteenth century ukiyo-e artist Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉 (1790–1848). First, Baba Bunkō:

It was perhaps [Hanabusa] Itchō, who gathered in a book the images of one hundred young women, and some time later, Nishikawa Sukenobu, about whom it is said that he was a virtuoso of ukiyo-e, erotic books, and *makura-e*, depicted confidential issues from the women quarters in the book *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame* 百人女郎品定.⁴ Later on, in a *makura-e* printed book called *Fūfu chigiri ga oka* 夫婦契ヶ岡, he drew sex images of characters from the court, bedroom business of important people, representations of adulterous bodies, sequestered consorts of the Hall of Purity and Freshness, spouses hidden in the Pear Tree Room, corridors which branch off at the narrow Wild Clover Door, ladies who visit their lord's bedroom, among many other intimate situations that happen behind the jeweled blinds.⁵ After this, a warning was issued by the authorities who applied severe measures, ordering the physical destruction of the printing blocks—as is well known to later generations. After this, erotic books were prohibited and so their buying and selling are nowadays carried out discreetly....⁶

3 In Western languages the main scholarship on Sukenobu in English is Preston 2012. In Japanese, there are mainly compilations of his work or general information about him as an illustrator: Taihei Bunko 2002, Kansai Daigaku Toshokan 1998, Akai 1982, Higashiōji 1970, and Miyatake 1911b. In addition, there are articles by Kondō Ichitarō 近藤市太郎 (1957), Ōhashi Noritamo 大橋乗保 (1962), Hayashi Yoshikazu 林美一 (1964, 1977), Kobayashi Tadashi 小林忠 (1966), and Matsudaira Susumu 松平進 (1977, 1981).

4 It is said that in the middle of the Genroku 元禄 era (1688–1704), the painter Taga Chōko 多賀朝湖 (1652–1724), later known as Hanabusa Itchō 英一蝶, depicted *Hyakunin jorō* 百人女郎 (One hundred young women) in a pamphlet, where he mixed upper-class women with common people, and for this reason was banished from Edo from 1698 to 1709 (Miyatake 1926, pp. 28–29). Bunkō, however, cites a different reason for his exile, namely that Itchō had produced the painting *Asazuma bune* 浅妻舟, which supposedly depicted Oden, the favorite concubine of shogun Tsunayoshi 綱吉 (Baba Bunkō 1891, p. 282). For thorough research on Itchō and his punishment, see Wattles 2005.

5 The Hall of Purity and Freshness (Seiryōden 清涼殿), the Pear Tree Room (Nashitsubo 梨壺), and the Wild Clover Door (Hagi no To 萩の戸) were residential spaces in the Kyoto Imperial Palace.

6 Baba Bunkō 1891, pp. 283–84.

And now Eisen:

According to a certain book, Nishikawa Sukenobu was a virtuoso of ukiyo-e, *makura-e*, and erotic books. It is said that in a certain year he depicted confidential matters from the women quarters in the book *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*, and later on, he introduced into *makura-e* characters from the court in a book called *Kōshoku narabi ga oka*. The images of sex from the one hundred young women, depict the bedroom antics of important people, as well as adultery, secret consorts in the Hall of Purity and Freshness, spouses hidden in the Pear Tree Room, corridors which branch off at the narrow Wild Clover Door, ladies who visit their lord's bedroom, among many other intimate situations that happen behind the jeweled blinds. After this, a warning was issued by the authorities who applied severe measures, ordering the physical destruction of the printing blocks—as was well known to later generations. Following this precedent, later erotic books were sold discreetly.⁷

These two records, cited in Miyatake's book—and, in turn, by nearly everyone making reference to the incident since—are the only ones I have been able to find relating to the subject. Thus, the precise details of any legal proceedings still remain unclear, as does the existence or otherwise of the erotic sequel. These uncertainties have led to the present-day situation of skepticism about the truth of the story, and about the very existence of the book itself.

The book that the *shunga* adaptation is allegedly based on, *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*, evokes in two volumes the ordinary life of Edo period women, collecting in its pages court ladies, samurai ladies, townswomen, country girls, geisha, and prostitutes, who perform a wide kaleidoscope of daily tasks and amusements.⁸ The idea for this kind of anthology was not new, and Sukenobu took as his point of departure the classical poetry collection *Hyakunin issbu* 百人一首 (a set of one hundred courtly waka 和歌 poems compiled by Fujiwara no Teika 藤原定家 [1198–1275] between approximately 1235 and 1241). There is no doubt that Sukenobu, in many of his later publications, used material from earlier works, refashioning them in novel ways. The one that Baba Bunkō mentions in the above quote, supposedly made by the painter Hanabusa Itchō at the end of the seventeenth century, created a strong precedent. In the same way, Ryūtei Tanehiko states that the book *Eiri miyako onna shina sadame* 絵入都女品定 (1702), displayed wealthy women on the same level as geisha, women from tea houses, and maids; and that in *Keisei hyakunin issbu* 傾城百人一首 (1703), prostitutes were presented doing their everyday activities. Both books were published in Kyoto.⁹

There are important clues in the comments of both Bunkō and Eisen; namely, the two book titles. While Bunkō gives the title *Fūfu chigiri ga oka*, Eisen proposes *Kōshoku narabi ga oka*. Taking advantage of the recent enormous efforts to open *shunga* collections to researchers, to digitalize *shunga* publications and to create *shunga*-related databases, the Nichibunken collection contains a copy of a Sukenobu erotic book called *Fūfu narabi no*

7 Keisai Eisen 1927, pp. 153–54.

8 Today we can find an original copy at the National Diet Library. For a complete facsimile copy, see Nishikawa Sukenobu 1723.

9 See note 4, and Ryūtei Tanehiko 1929, pp. 26 and 43.

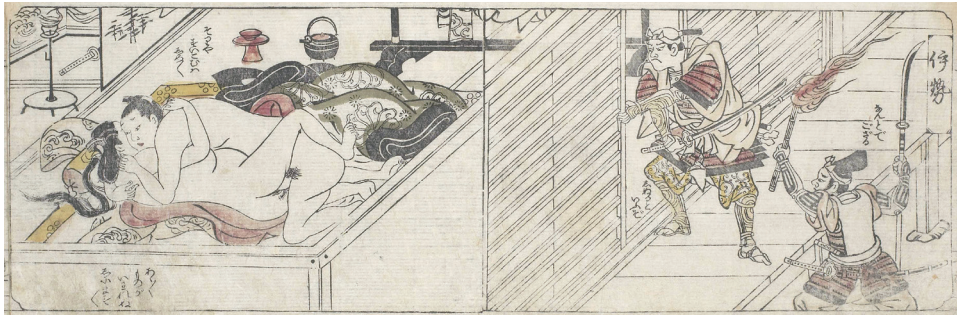


Figure 1. *Fūfu narabi no oka*. 1714. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

oka 夫婦双乃岡, which would seem to be a likely candidate. However, for reasons which will be explained below, I am not convinced that it is the same book mentioned by Bunkō and Eisen.

Fūfu narabi no oka is a three-volume horizontal format book (*yokohon* 横本) with a publication date of 1714, which shares with *Hyakunin jorō* the depiction of samurai and court people, in this case having sex (Figure 1). Although Miyatake mentions that the censored erotic book was issued before *Hyakunin jorō* was published in 1723, there is a definite lack of clarity concerning the data, since both Bunkō and Eisen say that the erotic sequel was actually published after *Hyakunin jorō*. It is also true that the first explicit condemnation from the bakufu against erotic books (*kōshokubon* 好色本) appeared in 1722.

Should we consider the possibility that the 1714 *Fūfu narabi no oka* was still popular and available for sale in 1723, and for that reason was considered at the time of 1722 edicts? We know, for example, that *Hyakunin jorō*—not explicitly sexual—was still banned during 1771.¹⁰ Alternatively, was a new edition of the book published, or an altogether new version written? There would have been nothing unusual about this, considering the commercial practices of the publishing houses in the period. We even have references, from the colophon of the 1738 book *Ehon Asakayama* 絵本浅香山, that Sukenobu planned to publish a book called *Ehon narabi no oka*, most likely a non-erotic version of the 1714 book (Figure 2).¹¹ Finally, as a third possibility, should we seek out another candidate hitherto unknown to us?

It is here that I would like to propose by way of alternative the book *Hime kagami* 比女鏡, copies of which can be found today in the Lane collection at the Honolulu Academy

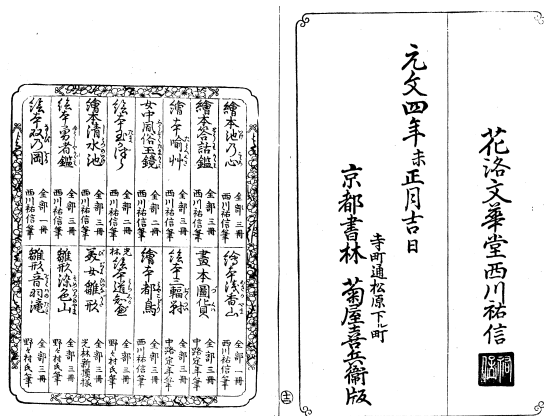


Figure 2. *Ehon Asakayama*. 1738. National Diet Library.

10 Kornicki 2001, p. 348.

11 Nishikawa Sukenobu 1738.

of Arts and Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan 日本浮世絵博物館 (Japan Ukiyo-e Museum), Matsumoto. This was originally another three-volume *yokohon*; although both collections have only copies of volumes one and three. We know about the title and the number of volumes thanks to the information given in the introduction to the book, where it is also stated that some images were copied from other sources and the dialogue changed. Although the date of publication of the work is uncertain, we can suggest that it seems to have been published in 1752, when Sukenobu was already dead.¹² Another interesting detail is that in the first image, printed in color, we can see a wealthy couple looking at a book which bears the title *Hyakunin onna* 百人女, an element that clearly connects this erotic book with the 1723 *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*, with the story of Sukenobu's censored erotic book, and also with Hanabusa Itchō's exile case of 1698 (Figure 3).¹³

Taking into consideration the information presented above, and the book itself, I



Figure 3. *Hime kagami*. 1752. Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.

would like to suggest speculatively at least that *Hime kagami* is a re-edition of the censored erotic book, or a later erotic version of *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*, posthumously published. My argument rests not only on the preliminary findings stated above, but also on an evaluation of the clear links between the two books.

To begin with, *Hyakunin jorō* and *Hime kagami* have an almost identical structure, beginning with images from court life, moving then to samurai spheres, and continuing with townspeople and other domains. The main obvious difference is the explicit sexual activity in the case of *Hime kagami*. Furthermore, a formal comparison of the works reveals additional keystones for building my argument. Comparing the examples that follow, we

12 The introduction to *Hime kagami* states that the book was published during the year of the monkey: “with the best of wills; spring of the year of the monkey...” (*mameyaka naru masaru no toshi no haru* まめやかなるまさるのとしの春); the most plausible date is 1752.

13 See above note 4.

can easily verify how the illustrator of the erotic book has reused many of the designs first made for *Hyakunin jorō*. For example, in the second illustration from the first volume of both books the location and design of the portable curtain on the left side matches (Figures 4a and 4b). The woman holding a small serving table and another speaking with her on the left appear again (Figures 5a and 5b). The woman holding paper decorations and looking to the left reappears with the small table repositioned behind her in the erotic version (Figures 6a and 6b). And pieces of fabric, as well as the woman on the left, are transformed from the waist up in the erotic version (Figures 7a and 7b).

The display of the sexual life of the court, of the samurai class, and of various wealthy people and commoners which is used in *Hime kagami* is not a novelty at all. One prototype is a five volume erotic book of 1711—also published by Hachimonjiya—entitled *Iro hiinagata* 色ひいな形 (Figure 8). In this book, Suke-nobu used content similar to that which he would take up again in *Fūfu narabi no oka*, *Hyakunin jorō* and other later books, dividing the volumes thematically: vol. 1, court; vol. 2, samurai; vol. 3, farmers; vol. 4, townspeople; and vol. 5, artisans and merchants.

I would now like to explore the possible reasons why one of Suke-nobu's erotic books was censored. It is important to point out that my main interest here is not to determine which of Sukenobu's currently known *shunpon* was the one censored. We may never know; nor is it likely that we will find all the necessary information for ascertaining this. It might be *Fūfu narabi no oka* censored long after its publication, or my suggestion of *Hime kagami*, or, indeed, a

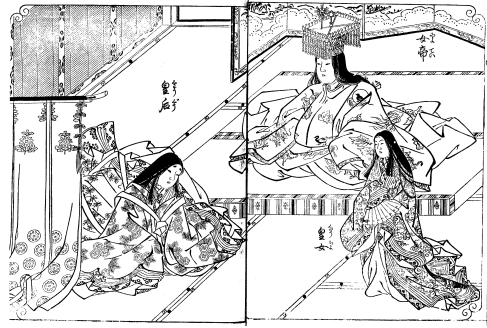


Figure 4a. *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*. 1723. National Diet Library.



Figure 5a. *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*. 1723. National Diet Library.



Figure 6a. *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*. 1723. National Diet Library.



Figure 7a. *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame*. 1723. National Diet Library.

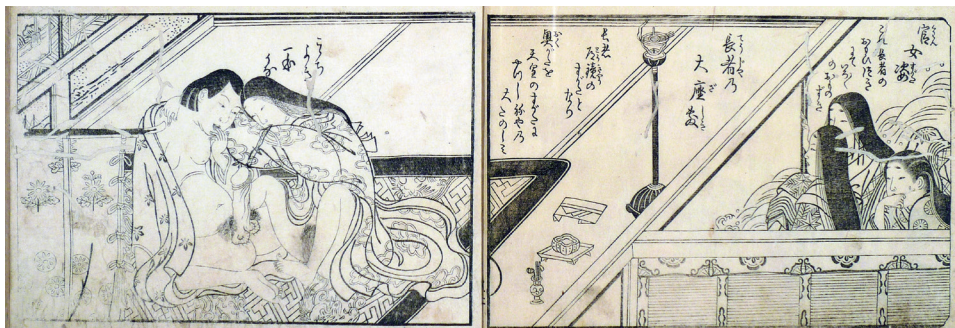


Figure 4b. *Hime kagami*. 1752. Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.

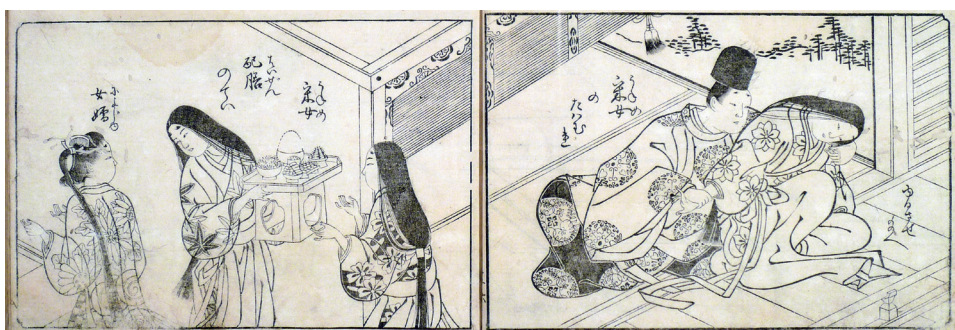


Figure 5b. *Hime kagami*. 1752. Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.

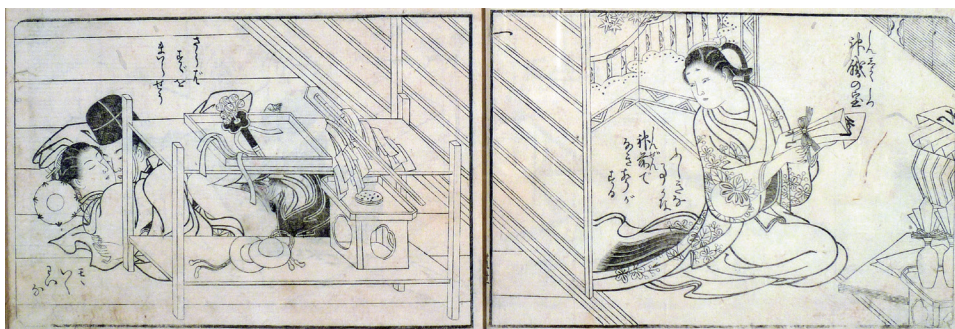


Figure 6b. *Hime kagami*. 1752. Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.

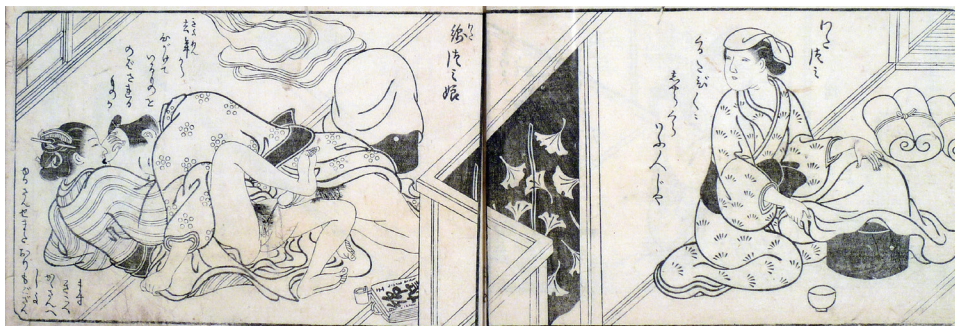


Figure 7b. *Hime kagami*. 1752. Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.

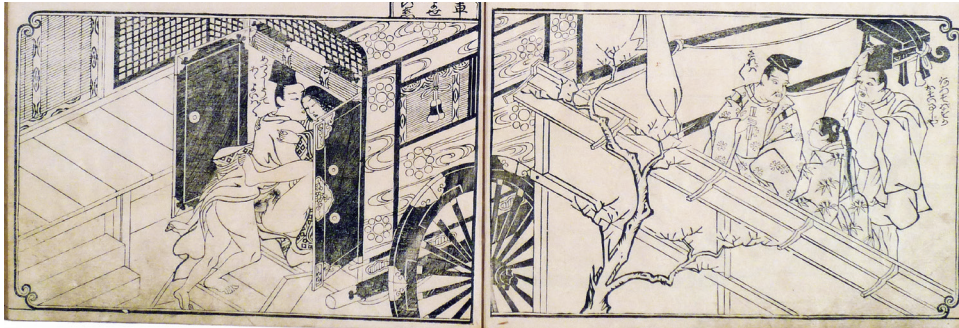


Figure 8. *Iro hiinagata*. 1711. Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.

new title that might suddenly appear among the collections that are presently being opened up. The specific title is not the major concern here. It is actually the existence of these very alternatives that allows us to realize that the target of control was not a single book, but Sukenobu and Hachimonjiya themselves, and their erotic book production.

We have a fair amount of information which demonstrates that from 1722 a more strict system was put in place to control the manufacture, distribution and sale of erotic books in general. In this sense, the edict of 1722 (Kyōhō 7), against the “category of erotic books” (*kōshokubon no rui* 好色本の類) was also transmitted to the Kyoto and Osaka guilds only a few months after it was announced in Edo.¹⁴ For example, thanks to the records that have survived, we know that in the third month of 1734 (Kyōhō 19) the Osaka guild issued a list of banned *kōshokubon* which members were not permitted to sell, and in 1740 introduced a system of fines for members found selling erotic images. Even in 1771 there is still evidence that such regulations were theoretically active within the Kyoto publisher’s guild; *kōshokubon* were still the object of control and Sukenobu’s *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame* was one of the titles listed in the *Kinsho mokuroku* 禁書目録.¹⁵

Considering the general ban against all *kōshokubon* books, why was Sukenobu and not another illustrator the object of the censor? First of all, in 1722 Sukenobu was one of the best-known erotic book illustrators, and the *kōshokubon* (*ukiyo zōshi* 浮世草紙) production of Hachimonjiya dominated the world of commercial fiction. In addition, his most productive years coincide with one of the great periods of reform of the entire Edo period, the so-called Kyōhō reforms (1716–1745), when for the first time we can document direct action by the authorities to restrict the production and distribution of sexually explicit printed books. Sukenobu was also a source of inspiration for later artists, and the creator of an impressive body of work. Due to this status he would have appeared a logical point of departure for a more effective regulation of these books and images, and that is why the censorship of his book stands is conspicuous.¹⁶

14 *Genshoku ukiyo-e dai hyakka jiten*, vol. 3, p. 121. The edict reads: “Among the publications currently produced, erotic books must gradually be inspected and withdrawn from circulation, since they are not beneficial to public morals.”

15 Kornicki 2001, p. 348.

16 For more information on Edo-period censorship, see Sakamoto 1997; Minami 1997; Tsuji 1981; Iizawa and Hayashi 1980; Minami 1974; and Nakamura 1972.

during a period of official crackdown. Both Sukenobu's erotic books and his *Hyakunin jorō shina sadame* were apparently best sellers, and their creator was the most famous designer of illustrated books and *shunga* of the period. Of course, in a situation like this, and regardless of the destruction of most of the printed copies, the publishing industry could very well have re-issued such a famous book later, taking advantage of less troubled times. There was also the option of "hiding" delicate information. Both these observations give force to my contention that *Hime kagami* is another possible candidate for the book that was the target in this famous case.

Finally, it is important to consider the mores under which we now study these practices of control.¹⁹ Modern Japanese conceptualizations of sex, morality, and *shunga* have been constructed since the Meiji era, and in modern Japan have had a strong Victorian tone, focusing on control policies targeting representations of sex. However, we should not assume that past censorship targeted "obscenity" in the same ways as modern laws. This may explain why, when we hear about "the regulation of *shunga*," we immediately associate it with "modern" controls on the representation of sex, even if, as was actually the case in Tokugawa Japan, regulations were generally addressed towards other aspects considered more controversial within the political milieu, such as the questioning of the legitimacy of power.

Not all sexually explicit visual materials were subject to control during the Edo period. In fact the situation was quite the opposite. Sophisticated and expensive paintings with identical content seem to have been of little concern to the authorities. It was the erotic books (*shunpon*) and prints (*makura-e*)—the popular, successful, and commercial versions of erotic imagery—which caused the most concern and bore the brunt of bakufu intervention.

The majority of the edicts and exemplary punishments carried out against the publishing world—and erotic prints in particular—were preceded by relatively relaxed times in terms of controls, periods of buoyant sales, and prosperity throughout the industry.²⁰ In the same way, the writers, editors and illustrators who were punished were all the highest representatives of their respective genres, and thus the censorship against them can be considered as actions designed to make popular examples of them. In the final analysis, the enormous popularity and commercial success of *shunga*, *ukiyo-e*, and popular literature fuelled the flourishing merchant economy of the townsman class, and contributed to a very public display of bakufu economic decline.

Prohibition and control of published materials constituted not just the suppression of mere representation, but rather demonstrated the government's ambition to neutralize the symbolic potential emerging from a section of the townsman imagination, which constantly transgressed the constructed boundaries of the established social hierarchy. Thus, the final targets of the controls, which tried to regulate goods and services relating to sex, were not predicated on any kind of puritanical values, but rather were squarely based upon the maintenance of status interests. Behind the ideological and moralizing masks, which were adopted to implement and justify controls on society and the individual lay an overriding concern for the perpetuation of the status quo—social, political, and economic.

19 For English language discussion of Edo censorship of images and texts, and of the most important individual cases, see Wattles 2005; Kornicki 2001; Clark 2009; Farge 1998; Davis 1997; Kern 1997; Markus 1992; Thompson and Harootunian 1991; Takeuchi 1987; and Leutner 1985.

20 García 2011.

It is thanks to the popularity of Sukenobu's erotic books, and to the Kyoto publishing industry's survival strategies—looking for ways to re-publish old “controversial” works, or new versions of them—that we have today a *pièce de résistance* like *Hime kagami*. A focus on this particular work offers us a new window on Sukenobu's oeuvre, on the characteristics of *shunga* in general, as well as on the government's attitude toward it.

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