

IV. HOW READING THE TEXT ENHANCES OUR ENJOYMENT

Question 4. In ukiyo-e *shunga* we often see text above the picture or near the characters. Is this depicting the eroticism in words?

A. In *shunga* we find all kinds of techniques and motifs, and sometimes the text enhances the eroticism of the pictures creating a narrative, but this is rather unusual. Most *shunga* are independent images, even in books, and the text serves to explain the setting and situation of the characters. Within ukiyo-e *shunga* there are two categories of texts, *kotoba-gaki* 詞書 and *kaki-ire* 書入れ. *Kotoba-gaki* are texts that explain aspects of the image. We find narrative prose but also Chinese poems, classical waka verse, as well as popular comic *kyōka* and *senryū* poems. These texts help us to understand the context of the pictures. In contrast *kaki-ire* express directly the words, thoughts, and feelings of the characters.

When we read the texts around or in the pictures, we gain a deeper understanding than just from looking at the images. We learn about the particular setting, the characteristics of the individuals and their relationship. Upon learning more details, the picture comes more realistically alive.

Kotoba-gaki

The difference between *kotoba-gaki* and *kaki-ire* is essentially that *kotoba-gaki* is third-person narrative that explains the context of the image, and the language is usually in literary style. *Kaki-ire*, on the other hand, is monologue or dialogue spoken by the characters, and is therefore in a realistic colloquial language. Fundamentally, then, they differ in their distance from the characters. The perspective of *kotoba-gaki* is from outside the frame of the picture, and *kaki-ire* is from within, and therefore represents the thoughts and words of the characters. This is like bubbles in contemporary manga where the words and thoughts are expressed. By reading the dialogue we often get a different idea of what is going on in the picture, from an initial impression based on the image alone. Sometimes the interpretation of the picture can even be the opposite of what was first thought.

However, if we consider *kaki-ire* in this way, we then see that the authors of ukiyo-e *shunga* used it for many different effects. In other words, their efforts and techniques were aimed at recreating the reality of sexual affairs. For this, rather than third-person narratives from the outside that explained the situation, they seem to have preferred the

rhetorical technique of presenting the raw feelings of the characters through their own thoughts and words. The ecstasy of sex is presented free from any kind of formality or pretense. The artists/authors of *shunga* cast aside rhetorical ornamentation or embellishment and depicted the uninhibited voices of the men and women.

Because dialogue sections do not employ rhetorical flourishes, some readers may be bored at the too frank or plain expressions, but viewing ukiyo-e *shunga* without reading the dialogues renders the appreciation simple and not very interesting. On occasion, even when the image is aesthetically magnificent, the language of the dialogue may be rude or base, and some may find this distasteful. However, ukiyo-e *shunga* was created as a taut balance between text and image that formed a complete work, and so we should not expect that an aesthetically beautiful image will be accompanied by crass text. What I mean is that a particular characteristic of ukiyo-e *shunga* is the juxtaposition of elegance and vulgarity, and it is in this contrast that we can see the aim to create a realistic depiction of sexual life.

In order to really appreciate ukiyo-e *shunga*, I cannot over-emphasize the importance for readers to enjoy the texts as much as the pictures. It will enhance the experience beyond expectations.

14. *Ehon aratama tsubaki* 会本新玉川発気

(Picture Book of a Beautiful Woman's Spit) (vol. 3, image 4)

Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1788.

In front of a stone stupa a man is pushing a woman against a bench. He is trying to insert his erect penis. Around them autumn leaves are scattered about. The man has a scarf across his face, and it seems at first that he is attempting to rape the woman at this lonely spot in temple grounds. However, the dialogue gives a different account:

Woman: “I’m so happy that mother comes for the “seven-day Kannon,” staying over every night each month from the evening of the seventeenth to the twenty-third. I can come see you every morning.”

Man: “Your mother is still praying to Kannon. I’m coming in. It shouldn’t hurt now.”

Woman: “Hurry and come in all the way. I’m really excited and ready today. The last time it hurt a bit, but this time it really feels good. Your little fellow seems even bigger this time.”

We see that the woman comes every morning to join her mother, who prays to Kannon Bodhisattva, and meets her lover secretly. The mother thinks her daughter is still a child but she has become a woman before her mother realizes. The image is transformed from just an image of copulation to that of a story of young lovers.



Figure 14

**15. *Fūryū enshoku Mane'emon* 風流艶色真似ゑもん
(Mane'emon's Erotic Adventures) (image 9)**

Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770). Set of twenty-four *chūban* color woodblock prints. 1770.

This print set is in a narrative format. A young man from Edo is interested in learning the secrets of the way of sex and prays to heaven. The goddess of love gives him a magic potion that shrinks him to bean size. He then travels the country seeking out carnal knowledge as a voyeur.

The text in this image states that Mane'emon has refreshed himself at a hot spring and is on the way back to Edo after seeing many couplings. He has just left Ikaho Hot Spring (about 100 km northwest of Edo). Along a road near a river he encounters a horse driver and his female customer in the midst of copulation while she is on the horse. Just looking at the image, one might think that the horse driver is taking advantage of the young woman,

even raping her. In fact, I have seen commentary on this image stating this, but without the woman's consent, this position would be impossible. Let's look at the dialogue:

Woman: "Now, thrust it in. This is called 'lapping up the dropped food of a titmouse.' We still have time till the boat comes."

Horse driver: "No need to pay your carriage fee. I'll even take you as far as Kumagaya two stations ahead."

The woman's reference to "lapping up the dropped food of a titmouse" is obscure, but seems to be a metaphor for the unusual position. Some birds "drop food" such as nuts or shells to break them open in order to eat the meat. So, this seems to mean that the "food" is the woman's vulva, and this is taking her from above.

The horse driver gets an unexpected treat and is so happy that he says she can ride for free and that he will take her even further than originally planned. He has in fact



Figure 15

fallen completely for her guile. All of the sentences are under the horse driver and they could be his, but only one uses polite language, which would indicate that this is the worker speaking to his customer.

Then what does Mane'emon make of this scene as he is relaxing in the shade of a tree.

“This fellow really has a big one. But his face hardly merits the name of ‘Yosaku’ the famous handsome horse driver.”

He refers to “Yosaku,” a common man’s name, but that would imply that the horse driver himself was good-looking in contrast to a rough country fellow. Mane’emon is unlikely to compliment a horse driver’s looks. Yosaku was another horse driver character, the handsome Yosaku from Tamba, in a Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) play. The man in this scene is well endowed and lucky enough to have this woman’s favors, so Mane’emon is a little jealous, and his comment implies that the man is ugly, nothing like the handsome Yosaku. The theme of this image is a young woman seducing a man.

16. *Imayō tsuma kagami* 今様妻鑑 (Mirror for Modern Wives) (vol. 1, image 6)
Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1771.



Figure 16

At the front gate of a town house we see a middle-aged man with a wicker hat and coat on leaving the house with servants who are carrying a set of picnic boxes. Back in the house a couple are left behind. It is not easy to understand the situation from the image alone. As explained before, this book makes use of Chinese poems from the Chinese-Japanese anthology *Wakan rōeishū*.

Let's consider the poem itself. Sugawara Michizane's (845–903) verse refers to the figurine (*gaijin*) made of mugwort that is used to ward off evil during the summer festival Tango no sekku (fifth day of fifth month). This figure is hung above the gate of the home. The overall meaning is: At the Tango festival the *gaijin* figurine above the gate sits dangerously ready to fall. However, just because he has legs, doesn't mean that he will escape back to the garden.

In the image, however, there is no figurine or reference to the Tango festival. We need to read the dialogue to understand what is going on. First at the gate: "Ah, the weather is really great today. Has everyone left?" And so we can see that the family are off to an outing together.

Next we hear the conversation of the pair inside:

Man: "Now the house is all ours. Your complaining of a headache, was it all a fib? Great idea!"

Woman: "Now, now keep quiet. Imasuke is still in the kitchen."

Man: "Are we ready yet?"

Woman: "Ready for anything that you would like!"

We can imagine a scenario: the family has all just left for the picnic outing. The new wife of the son feigns a headache and stays home with the husband. Then, the *gaijin* figurine could refer to the wife. The mugwort, now a human-shaped figurine guarding the house from a precarious spot, likes having a human shape and does not want to return to the outside garden. The wife, before an outsider, has now found the joys of sex with her new husband, and rather than go out with the family, she wants to stay home alone with her husband.

We cannot help but be impressed at the cleverness of the analogy between the mugwort that discovers the joys of being a human figurine and the young wife who relishes her new conjugal intimacy. It is the words that allow this image to have such a delicate expression.



Figure 17

17. *Kōshoku zue jūnikō* 好色図會十二候 (Twelve Months of Love) (image 8)
Katsukawa Shunchō (d.u.). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1788.

A room with a grand circular window, and a feast of saké and various dishes. While having intercourse, the woman is serving the man saké in a large red lacquer cup. At first glance this looks like a lusty pair on a rendezvous at a *deai jaya* (meeting room in an inn). Then we notice the man is wearing a light *yukata* robe and relaxing. Somehow it doesn't seem right for an inn. Let's listen to the dialogue:

Man: "Tonight, is it because of the Harvest Moon? Everything tastes delicious."

Woman: "I'm feeling extra good tonight too. This is the fifth time I've come."

Man: "Let's take a break and have some saké."

Woman: "I don't want you to drink too much. It's poison to our body."

Man: "You're more poisonous than the drink!"

Interpreting the dialogue of this pair, we see that they are a couple having a little party to celebrate the autumn moon viewing. If we look close, we can see that the woman's teeth are blackened, indicating that she is married. Her concern for his drinking also implies she is his wife. In contrast the husband reposts with a joke about the wife being too lusty. They seem to be an intimate couple. In Japan, the autumn moon viewing on the fifteenth of the eighth month brings to mind the image of a rabbit on the moon making rice cakes with a mortar and pestle. The mortar and pestle are also common metaphors for the penis and vulva. Therefore, moon-viewing naturally fits with sexual intercourse. We can see why they say that everything “tastes great” this full-moon night. Further, the wide saké cup that she uses to serve her husband is also a common symbol of a woman's vulva.

18. *Kōshoku zue jūnikō* 好色図會十二候 (Twelve Months of Love) (image 11)
Katsukawa Shunchō (d.u.). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1788.

From the image alone, we may imagine that a young man is having his way with an older woman. Let's listen to the dialogue:



Figure 18

Older woman: “The reason I came to see kabuki was to be able to enjoy your company like this. There’s no one as beautiful as you.”

Young man: “Madame, I appreciate your attentions, but could you be a little quieter. They can hear below.”

Older woman: “Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter if they can hear below. Those in this teahouse understand things and are discreet.”

Young man: “The next scene is about to begin. Everyone is waiting for us to return.”

Older woman: “Your piece is fuller and longer than my late husband’s, making you even more delicious. Ah! Push higher up and deeper. Push hard enough to break the ceiling beams. Ah, ah, um. . .”

Young man: “Ah, ah! I’m about to come. Ah. . .”

Reading the dialogue, we can understand that the image is of a widow of a large business who has taken a group of employees to see kabuki theater. In between scenes when there is time for a meal, the widow has taken her favorite young employee up to the second floor of the attached teahouse and they are enjoying each other. The intervals at that time were long and so there was time for this kind of frolicking in the theater teahouses. Customers could eat and drink and entertain their favorite actors. The young man could be a favorite actor of the widow, but his relatively modest kimono and his concern about being seen with her, would suggest that he is an employee of the shop.

19. *Negai no itoguchi* 願ひの糸ぐち (Threads Leading to Desire) (image 7)

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1799.

An image of a couple in a nondescript room of a house. The pair are both wearing only light *yukata*, which suggests that they are a married couple having a passionate session after their bath. However, the dialogue tells a different story:

Woman: “Kyū-san, your wife must be in heaven. What a delight to be able to savor such a wonderful piece all the time. On top of that you like to try all kinds of techniques, what marvelous star she must have been born under. I’m jealous. My husband, as you well know, is ugly and a brute. Although a rough fellow, his tool is narrow and short. I’ve had it up to here with him. I hate him.”

Man: “Now, now, calm down. I’ll soon make you my wife, so make sure to keep your pussy clean for me.”

Woman: “Ah, that feels good. . .”

Man: “Me too!”



Figure 19

So, we see that the woman is married and the man as well. We are witnessing an illicit affair. Yet, their dialogue is light, lively, and straightforward, which enlivens the image. The banter reminds one of an Edo *rakugo* comic storytelling performance about lower-class love affairs that you can still hear today.

20. *Hana fubuki* 葉男婦舞喜 (A Shower of Flower Petals) (vol. 1, image 7)
Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1802.

In ukiyo-e *shunga* we occasionally see scenes where a husband gets excited when seeing his wife nursing their baby, and at first glance this seems to be the case. The woman is wearing a light *yukata* robe with an underslip and her hair wet after the bath. However, this image too is transformed by reading the dialogue:

Woman: “This child is definitely yours. He doesn’t look anything like my husband. He looks like you.”



Figure 20

Man: “People tend to say that the pussy of a woman with a baby (*komochi no bobo*) doesn’t taste good, but for me, if not a woman nursing a child, I know I wouldn’t enjoy it. Ah, good, good. Nothing better! It feels so good. It’s a waste to let go, but I can’t hold back any longer. I feel it all up my backbone.”

In other words, we see that this is a wife with her secret lover. A wife’s adultery is not unusual in ukiyo-e *shunga* but it is surprising to see that the child the woman is nursing is her lover’s as well. The man doesn’t seem fazed at all on hearing that he is the father, and only shows his sexual excitement. If we limit ourselves only to ukiyo-e *shunga*, we might think that Edo people were not as concerned as we are today about legitimate blood links between parents and children.