

## VIII. LIVELY WOMEN

**Question 8. From long ago Japan is said to be a country of men first, women second. In *shunga* do we see a preference for showing men's passion?**

**A.** This is a common misunderstanding. I often encounter opinions about *shunga* that say that in the explicit depiction of sex, the setting is for women to be the objects of men's lust and they are only there to serve men. It is usually the case that such individuals have not actually viewed *shunga* in any depth, and are making these judgments based on contemporary pornography.

To be sure, there are many images where the men seem to be in control, and even after reading the text we see that there are many cases where the man is taking the lead. However, does this mean that men are revered and put first, and women considered lowly and only in service to men? If we are to argue this point from the perspective of absolute egalitarianism between the sexes, then it is difficult to offer a counter argument. Edo-period *shunga* is following a long tradition of popular attitudes on sexuality and bases its depictions of sex on this rather than the official morality regarding sex at the time.

As we have seen in the above examples of *shunga*, there have been hardly any images where the man is entirely in control, and most show the couple both enjoying sex. The men and women who appear in *shunga* never seem to be concerned with moral questions. It is remarkable how little reflection on morality there is. As the reader well knows, both Buddhism and Confucianism, the official religion and official ethical code, preached against carnal desire as an evil, but we hardly see any trace of this in *shunga*. There is of course embarrassment on occasion, but this is not due to morality, but rather to inexperience or in avoiding exposure, a natural reticence about sex. In *shunga*, experienced characters, both men and women, are forthright in the pursuit of pleasure for each other. We could consider this to be the peak of carnal love, but in *shunga* we also see that couples pursuing mutual pleasure are less driven by sexual drive and are simply following the instinctual flow of human nature.

In ukiyo-e *shunga*, one of the important driving forces is the lively and active participation of women. As we have seen, men are the instigators in most encounters, but the women respond positively with vigor and without constraint. We can see this in the images, but it is in the text where this comes through strongly.

In *shunga*, almost a reverse of their public roles, we see women's actions in the private world of sex presented as lively and positive. Women often initiate and seek out pleasure from their lovers. Of course *shunga*, like other art and literature, is fiction and

exaggerates, but we see them abandon pretense and embarrassment in the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. This leads to a denouement of rapture for both the men and women. In this way we see *shunga's* premise of “harmony between the sexes” where men’s pleasure alone is not predominant, and where women are equally active players in the eternal battle of the sexes. Those who are experienced in mature love will see this as natural, but in fact there are few cases in art or literature where sex is portrayed in this way. For this reason *shunga* is unusual and important.

When we listen to the voices of women in *shunga*, it reminds me of the story of the creation of the Japanese islands by the gods Izanami and Izanagi related at the beginning of the ancient *Kojiki* (712). First the female Izanami, attracted to the handsome man Izanagi, initiates sex but the children born are without bones. The couple then consult the god of Heaven Amatsukami, and are told that an oracle states that the reason was because the female took the lead. Therefore, the second time Izanagi initiates. He calls out to her saying she is a fine woman, and she replies what a handsome man he is. This time “healthy” Japanese islands are born. This myth represents the private love between a man and a woman as also the public creation of Japan. I believe that this story is important and we often see it referred to in *shunga* prefaces. The Edo artists who depicted *shunga* were greatly concerned with how to represent women. This was because they knew that true sexual rapture could not be achieved showing men alone as the focus and most important. Artists knew that both men and women needed to cast aside the trappings and restraints of public social mores in order to achieve carnal bliss.

We have seen thus far several examples of women in the bedroom being lively and active. Now let us consider some examples of women taking the lead and initiating sex, that is “women on top.”

**48. *Ebon haru no akebono*** 笑本春の曙 (**Dawn in Spring**) (vol. 2, image 5)

Kitao Shigemasa (1739–1820). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1772.

The image shows an adolescent girl and boy. The scene takes place on the veranda of the back garden in a city house. The girl is pulling the arm of the boy, enticing him. Their dialogue is:

Girl: “Now, I have something I want to tell you. If you don’t listen to me, then I’ll tell papa.”

Boy: “But, I . . . .”

We learn that the girl is the daughter of the master of the house and is using her position to seduce her father’s employee. The boy seems to be worried about all this,

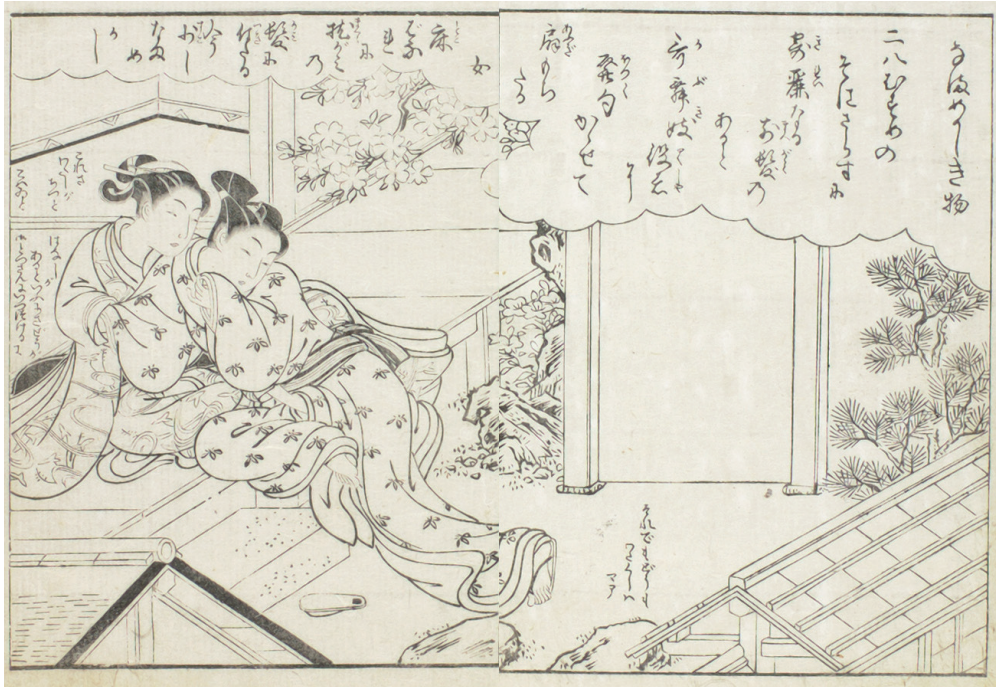


Figure 48

but is afraid the consequences of refusing the spoiled and headstrong daughter. But he knows that to agree might also lead to trouble. Both boys and girls will use their father's authority for their own ends.

Further, in the later *Keika toridasuki* 閨花鳥襪 (Love Birds in the Boudoir) Shigemasa includes a scene that could follow this one. An employee is led into a room and the daughter of the house pushes him down and tries to take off his sash.

**49. *Ehon jinkōki*** 会本賢強喜 (**Picture Book: Joys of Ejaculation**) (vol. 3, image 1) Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1789.

An older woman is embracing a young man. The dialogue is:

Lady-in-waiting: “Every time I come here in place of his lordship, I’ll teach you something good, so follow carefully my lead. Oh, my, what a beautiful fellow. I can’t hold back any longer. Take off your formal trousers (*hakama*). I’ll treat you to a nice souvenir, so listen carefully. I’m really shaking trying to hold back.”

Young acolyte: “Thank you for your attentions, but if the head priest hears of this, I’ll surely be scolded.”

We can see that the woman is a lady-in-waiting in a grand samurai house and has come to make offerings at the family grave, and is attempting to seduce the acolyte. As we have seen, women in such service were not able to meet men and so she is keen to take advantage of the opportunity at the temple, and particularly with this handsome young fellow. His reaction gives us a hint that he is in fact the sexual partner of the head priest, who would not like him to have any other relations.



Figure 49

**50. *Koi moyō* 恋模様 (Patterns of Love) (images 3 and 4)**

Kikukawa Eizan (1787–1867). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1817.

The image is again of a woman in service who takes advantage of leave to frolic. Behind the couple we see an elaborate dinner set out suggesting a rendezvous in a fancy restaurant/inn.

Lady-in-waiting: “It’s been a long time since I’ve had leave to go home, and I was first of all looking forward to seeing you. No interest in theater, or other things, I came here immediately after stopping by home. Now, hurry and let my spirit fly. Ah, just gazing at your tool gets me horny and ready to come—even before you’re in.”





Figure 50-1



Figure 50-2

Man: “Today in order to keep it up, I’ll get you really wet by rubbing you with this big dick. But my, what a nice, puffed up pussy!”

Allowed to return home only once or twice a year, such women in service surely must have anticipated this kind of meeting with bated breath. The overt reason was to see parents but it was also a chance for young women to entertain themselves, and going to see a favorite actor was thought to be the most popular pleasure. But if a woman had a boyfriend, then like this woman, she must have looked forward most to seeing her lover. The man, anticipating her feelings, appears to have made himself ready.

The next image seems to be a continuation. The woman already has her hat and socks off, as well as her coat, and seems in a peak of passion.

Man: “I’ve been looking forward to your return since last year. Today, all day, I’ll fuck you till you’re dry.”

Woman: “My voice is so loud they’ll hear outside, so I’m biting my sleeve and holding back, but my breathing’s heavy. Oh, oh, oh! It’s delight from start to finish. My whole body has melted, limp. I’m dripping down there like a waterfall. This is the fifth time I’ve come.”

Man: “I’m really feeling good too. I can’t hold back any longer. Ah, Ah . . .”

Both the man and the woman are intent on giving all to each other. We notice that the aphrodisiac *chōmeigan* is next to the pillow. We can sense that the pair really wanted this to be a satisfying and passionate meeting. The text presents an ideal of an enlightened harmony between the sexes.

**51. *Ehon komachi biki*** 絵本小町引 (**Picture Book: Pulling Komachi**) (image 8) Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Set of thirteen *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1802.

An older seemingly strong-willed woman is enjoying sex in a sitting position with a naked man. At first glance this seems to be a merchant couple at home enjoying sex. What does the dialogue tell us?

Lover: “The sad part of being just a lover, is that you jump at any little sound.”

Wife: “Don’t be such a wimp. Just think you’re riding on a big boat and relax. Tonight my husband won’t be back till after midnight. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

Lover: “That means we still have six hours. Three times every two hours means we can do it nine times.”

Wife: “Hold me tighter still. That’s it. Oh, oh. . .”





Figure 51

Lover: “That tastes delicious. What a tight fit! Ah, ah.”

Wife: “We’re really a great fit down there. It feels magnificently snug.”

We can infer that this is a scene of a wife having an affair with her lover. We can also see that it is the woman who is more relaxed about it. Her words are not surprising for a merchant woman who intends to have an affair when her husband is away.

## 52. *Fukujusō* 富久寿楚宇 (**Adonis Plant**) (image 9)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1815.

Image of a couple naked, having sex from behind. Like the previous image, at first glance this appears to be an intimate scene of a married couple. Let’s listen to the dialogue:

Wife: “My husband’s away tonight and I’m really delighted. Happy as hell! This is a rare chance for a leisurely night, so I want you to come in giving me pleasure all night. That’s it, a little more, right there, push! Squeeze me tighter. Oh, oh. . . Never had such bliss. More, more, oh, oh, like that. . .”



Figure 52

Lover: “Your husband’s away, and so we both can have our fill of fun. Ah, ah! Your coming has made me excited too. Can’t hold on. Let’s come together. Ah, ah. . .”

As we can see here too this depicts a wife’s delicious affair with her lover when the husband is away. In *shunga* we often see wives having affairs, and the butt of the joke is usually the cuckolded husband.

**53. Tamakatsura** 多満佳津良 (**A Beautiful Moon**) (vol. 3, image 8)  
Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1821.

At a glance it looks as if a woman was having a bath in the garden when a young man sneaks in and tries to seduce her, but the dialogue tells a different story:





Figure 53

Woman master: "Chōkichi. Over here!"

Young clerk: "Yes, Ma'am."

Woman master: "Before thunder and lightning strike, I want to put this barrel of water away, so could you come and wash my back please."

Young clerk: "Yes, yes. Please hand me the wash towel."

Woman master: "Why, you can use your own towel."

Young clerk: "Yes, but my towel is very soiled with my sweat."

Woman master: "Now, now, what a silly fellow. That sweat on the towel is what I want."

Young clerk: "Yes, yes. I heard what you said Ma'am, but do you really mean that?"

Woman master: "Ha, why? What would you do if it was a lie?"

Young clerk: "Well, if it is a lie, I'd do this."

Woman master: "Oh, very nice. Go on do what you like. Like this, like this."

Young clerk: "Yes, then I'll go on and do this."

From behind he thrusts his erection into her vulva, and warm from the bath, her pussy sucks him in.

Woman master: “Oh, oh, . . . Ah, ah. . . . Look lightning and now thunder rumbling. It’s raining! Oh how frightening!”

Young clerk: “Wow, this feels magnificent. Very nice, nice!”

Woman master: “Oh, oh, ah, ah. Flash of lightning again! Oh, yes, yes. All wet and splashing. Knock on wood! Need a lightning rod.”

Thunder, lightning, and rain come hurtling down, making a muddy mess.

Young clerk: “Like stuffing a dried dumpling into a steamed squishy bun. What a cunt! No wonder the Master got the palsy.”

Woman master: “Though you’re an Edoite through and through, your dick is firm and its head huge, and it stays erect. What a fantastic rod.”

We see that it was the woman master who began the affair. On a summer eve, the woman entices the young clerk she’s had her eye on to her bath, and gets him to scrub her back in order to seduce him. Getting him in the mood, they then enjoy each other. The clerk jokes that because of her randiness and voluptuous pussy, it is no wonder that the husband has palsy.

Furthermore, the dialogue also includes a range of onomatopoeia, which is a common technique in Hokusai’s *shunga*. Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933) is famous for creating onomatopoeia in the modern era, but we can also see a tremendous range in Hokusai’s *shunga*.

#### 54. *Kinoe no komatsu* 喜能会之故真通

(Auspicious: Intercourse at New Year) (vol. 1, image 2)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1814.

An older woman with shaven eyebrows, completely naked, straddles a young man, guiding his penis into her—a rather dramatic image. At a glance, this too looks similar to the previous scene, of a woman master taking advantage of an employee. However, here again the dialogue offers an unexpected turn:

Adopted son: “Mother, let’s call it a night after three times. Tomorrow morning, as usual, I’ll be ready to serve you again.”

Widow: “Now, now, how unfilial this child is. My husband is now gone, and I’m to





Figure 54

be a widow forever more. Although I don't want the relatives gossiping about me, I wondered when a new buddha would take its place in my sacred temple, and it was then at the temple that I saw your gentle handsome face. Once I set eyes on you, I wanted for nothing, and was determined to adopt you. I worried about this and that, but finally I tricked that horny priest, and we are now parent and child. But how can you still say such cold things. Be kind to your poor mother. Like this, thrust it in as deep as it'll go. Good, ah, oh, ah. . . Nice, nice. Ah, ah. . . delicious, ah, ah. Such a dutiful boy." (Lots of sounds as the pillow and quilt moves around.)

We are surprised to learn that the man is an adopted son and the older woman his mother. The husband has died and she has vowed to remain a widow for the rest of her days. She had noticed the young man at the temple where she had services for her deceased husband, and fell for his charms. Then she devised a strategy to adopt him, and is using him for her pleasure every night. This is the setting for the image. It was in fact common

for childless homes to adopt an heir, but here it is shocking to see that the aim was to fulfill the widow's carnal desires. In *senryū* comic haiku there are references to such women:

Seemingly a proper foster mother, inside she's a wife  
 She got herself a lover—an adopted son

As these ditties show, rumors of foster mothers and adopted sons in such relationships were common. In *shunga* we see examples of adopted sons having affairs with their foster mothers, and of widows adopting handsome sons as a kind of male “mistress.”

The way of filial piety / “serving” his foster mother each night

This *senryū* seems to fit the image above exactly. In *shunga* there are hardly any lonely widows. Once they cease to worry about what others think, they pursue openly their own desires.

**55. *Hana fubuki* 葉男婦舞喜 (A Shower of Flower Petals)** (vol. 2, image 6)  
 Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1802.



Figure 55



A mature woman leans on the *kotatsu* brazier, sitting on the lap of a man, seemingly in a moment of carnal bliss, while the man seems uninterested.

Widow: "Hurry, come inside hard. Ah, ah, even before you're in, I'm coming. Ah, ah!"

Gigolo: "Life of a kept man is rough! Thinking about it now, the gigolo of that woman acrobat must have had it really tough."

As we can gather from the dialogue, the man is a gigolo, kept as the lover of the widow. In the late Edo period, there seems to have been a trend for wealthy widows to keep gigolos. Of course there would have been many widows who kept their marriage bed chaste, but this wouldn't have been of interest to *shunga*, where widows are by convention sexually forthright and active.

Measuring his nose / passes muster as a gigolo

This comic poem suggests that such kept men were not just for polite socializing but were kept openly as sexual partners for this new type of widow. In *shunga*, it became conventional that the gigolo would become exhausted and unable to satisfy the woman's sexually voracious demands.

The gigolo staggers / dismissed /  
How hard the life of a gigolo / happy to take his leave

The man at first was happy thinking what good fortune, but soon drags himself away exhausted.