

Laura Moretti, *Pleasure in Profit: Popular Prose in Seventeenth Century Japan*.

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Many people work on Japanese popular fiction of the seventeenth century, and even more engage with it as enthusiastic readers. The name we all know is Ihara Saikaku (1642–93). He dominated the field, we are generally told, with a series of best-selling titles that gripped readers across the Japanese archipelago's major cities and went through multiple print runs, and still do so. Saikaku captured an age of peace, after Japan's long civil war, which then flowered in the rich and free-spending Genroku period (1688–1704). Saikaku talked of “floating worlds” (*ukiyo*), places of pleasant and carefree existence, indeed, of irresponsibility and profligacy. We respond to this. His titles say it all: *Life of a Sex-Mad Man* (Kōshoku ichidai otoko 好色一代男, 1682), *Life of a Sex-Mad Woman* (Kōshoku ichidai onna 公職一代女, 1686), *Five Sex-Mad Women* (Kōshoku gonin onna 公職五人女, 1686), and *Great Mirror of Sex between Men* (Nanshoku ōkagami 男色大鏡, 1687). Generally, translations discretely render *kōshoku* as “amorous,” but the true translation gives the true feel. What endears Saikaku to modern readers and scholars, however, is less his racy content than the fact that we can relate to his books in terms of format, characterization, and style—that is, they can be classified as *novels*. In this, Saikaku is neatly slotted into place with Miguel de Cervantes for Spanish literature, Daniel Defoe for English, or Hans Jakob Christoffel Grimmelshausen for German. Since the European authors are somewhat later, Saikaku's work not only sets Japanese literature alongside that of what remain dominant world literatures but even gives it priority.

Moretti's index has a dozen entries for Saikaku, which is few. She sees our understanding of Edo-period prose as warped at least partly by our estimation for the origins of the novel, for what happens to be today's pinnacle among literary genres. In short, it is averred that we *can* like Saikaku because he's what we are used to, but we *should* like him (and study him) because he opened the door to where we are today. Moretti points out that to read like this is to make impositions from outside. This, in turn, vitiates proper engagement with what was published. To her, this is a tragedy because it entails ignoring a vast quantity of books, which gave pleasure at the time and can continue to do so today, but also because these books are part of the historical record that those who want to understand the early Edo period should not omit from their embrace.

Moretti's work is akin to that of Mary Elizabeth Berry, whose much-admired *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period* (2008) also looks at the array of published works, on their own terms, without imposition of modern genres. Whereas Berry's interests relate to information, even, one might say,

data, Moretti wants any line between that domain and literature to be erased. The books she considers neither solely imparted facts nor delighted with imaginative creations: they did both. To this end, she uses the term *prose*. Her period is also shorter than Berry's—not the Edo period (1603–1868), but from 1603 up to, but not including, Saikaku.

It is well known that the capital (today's Kyoto), later followed by the shogunal seat, Edo (Tokyo), enjoyed extraordinary levels of publishing. Berry already made the details available in English, and Moretti reinforces them with much more. By late in the century, some one thousand publishers of various types operated in the capital with, Moretti calculates, some 1 million titles in their catalogues. This was for a city of not more than 250,000 people—though, admittedly, books were published in few places, so they circulated widely. Of them, we are told, less than 1.5 percent have ever been investigated by scholars, never mind issued in available modern editions. We cannot easily say how many copies were circulating because printing was on demand. But a set of woodblocks was capable of many hundreds of impressions. Three hundred were required to break even, while a thousand represented a notable achievement. Titles could cross-subsidize one another, and enlightened publishers surely brought out books that merited exposure but would not sell as well as expected money spinners.

Moretti's project goes far beyond this and is all the more exciting for it. First, she analyses who has access to books. Some 40 percent of titles, many written in *kanbun*, which she calls “Sinitic,” required high literacy. But that still left an awful lot in the vernacular, known collectively as *kanazōshi* (books written in the Japanese syllabary), with minimal Chinese characters. They were available to most urban people, and Moretti suggests that a couple of years' basic education was enough, which we know most people received, albeit often interruptedly and while doing something else. Characters that were included (for if there are none, conversely, reading becomes more difficult) are routinely given pronunciation glosses, written alongside. It was quite hard to be completely illiterate. As for prices, a large, multivolume work might take a maid's entire monthly wage, but a one-volume effort cost just the equivalent of a bowl of noodles. Naturally, books were handed about and borrowed, perhaps also stolen. In the next century, there would be lending libraries too. The written word, says Moretti, permeated life.

When we start to look at seventeenth-century prose publications on their own terms, we have some surprises. It is astonishing how voraciously Moretti has read, and as a result her findings are equally astonishing as well as closely argued and compelling. We find our modern canonization, with our preferred authors, downgraded. Miyako no Nishiki, whom no one has heard of today, was regarded as better than Saikaku.

All the above, fascinating though it is, is but a prelude to Moretti's real point. She may be the first to query canonization in early Edo prose, but questioning the canon is itself now a common exercise. Rather, she reveals how once we desist from our quest for books that fit as modern-style masterpieces and once we erase the division between literature and information, we uncover that all this prose was about something particular. Moretti calls this knowledge. It is not the same as

information. Most people today are likely to read fiction and nonfiction with the aim of becoming (at the risk of sounding pretentious) better people. Self-improvement was what these books were about too—improvement to a person's understanding. This might, though might not, lead to wealth, better marriage prospects, a longer life, or more friends, but it did lead to a firmer grasp of the panoply of issues that real life presented. Prose works were less how-to books than how-to-be books. They taught but also inculcated aspirations. They slipped about between narrative (fiction) and information (nonfiction), between pure and impure fiction and bald facts. Today we find that hard to characterize, so we simply shun these books or consider them deficient, using criteria that they were never written to match. Our divisions simply did not pertain before Saikaku and, in most instances, not afterward either. Saikaku was kicking over the applecart, and that brought him dividends, but he was just one voice among many—in fact, among thousands. He changed things, but not for everyone, nor all at once.

Moretti's book will change things too. She has given us (to risk a pun) a totally novel reassessment of early Edo prose. And, it must be added, with numerous, sometimes quite long and always beautiful translated episodes, the modern reader does not just learn history better but can find pleasure and profit in these forgotten books, just as someone in the seventeenth century did.

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