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Mario Talamo

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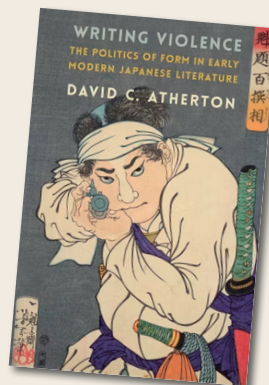
BOOK REVIEW

Writing Violence: The Politics of Form in Early Modern Japanese Literature

By David C. Atherton

Columbia University Press, 2023
312 pages.

Reviewed by Mario TALAMO*



Writing Violence: The Politics of Form in Early Modern Japanese Literature deals with literary representations of violence during the Edo period (1603–1868). It is comprehensive in its coverage, engaging with representations of violence in all its forms, from fire to vengeance, from adultery to honor killings. The book is written in an elegant and scholarly style which is, however, possibly difficult for readers without English as a native language. *Writing Violence* is composed of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, with each section of the book approaching the topic from a multidisciplinary perspective covering literature, history, art and legal history, and the broader history of thought. The invocation of different fields in this study is a valuable contribution for readers, particularly those less familiar with Japanese literature in the Edo period.

Chapter 1 deals with the macro genre of *kana* booklets, which were particularly popular during the first part of the Edo period, and specifically focuses on *Musashi abumi* (1661) by Asai Ryōi (d. 1691). Chapter 2 turns its attention to blood revenge, drawing on the author's PhD dissertation. The key text here is *Budō denraiki* (1687) by Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693). *Jōruri* (puppet theater) and Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) take center stage in the third chapter, while the fourth deals once again with fiction, particularly the *Masurao monogatari* (1807 here, also 1806) by Ueda Akinari (1734–1809). The final chapter in the book is about the tradition of *yomihon* (reading books) from the city of Edo and analyzes the *Fukushū kidan Asaka no numa* (1803) by Santō Kyōden (1761–1816).

Each text is placed in its historical and literary context. For instance, through Asai Ryōi's work, Atherton both describes the genre of seventeenth-century disaster literature and offers a new way of reading the world through this literature. Whereas Ihara Saikaku's work offers a chance to discuss vendettas, one of the legal forms of violence in early modern Japan, the attention to *jōruri* and Chikamatsu allow Atherton to dwell on adultery and the punishment of transgression. Ueda Akinari's tale constitutes the perfect foil against which to discuss issues related to honor killing. Santō Kyōden's *yomihon* finally offers the means to expound upon the

* Mario Talamo is a Visiting Research Scholar at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies. His academic interests concern the literature and intellectual history of the late Edo period.

notion of frontiers, violent clashes between individuals living in different places, and attempts to establish relations with other countries.

This is a work of meticulous scholarship that provides a series of fascinating windows into the literary productions that the author describes and contextualizes through deep dives into the individual texts that are the centerpieces of each chapter. To give a couple of examples, chapter 4 begins with the social and ideological context that serves as background to Ueda Akinari's tale, which is sketched in great detail. Atherton moves from history to literature to societal analysis, as the text itself (plot, authorial biography, and production of the text) is placed in relation to the historical facts of Masurao's life in order to engage with the *kokugaku* tradition of national philologists. This clearly shows Akinari was involved in a broader debate concerning the ideological role of fiction and allows for Atherton to relate the sorrow of the main character in the text with the author's own sufferings. The same comprehensive approach is evident in the final chapter on the *yomihon* of Santō Kyōden, which narrates events taking place in the north of the country. These offer Atherton the opportunity to analyze the concept of periphery, focusing on the island of Ezo during the last part of the Edo period, when a series of political and social transformations shifted the Bakufu's attention north. This depiction of early nineteenth-century society gives way to the production of *yomihon*, the problem of cultural geography, and the opportunity that visiting new spaces offered to scholars, as they turned new forms of literary production into a means of channeling studies on traditions, history, and local folklore.

In the conclusion of the book, which introduces the *Kaidai hyakusensō* (One hundred selected portraits of those who dashed ahead, 1868–1869) as a new literary production inspired by violence, Atherton returns to formalism, the approach that seemingly constitutes the basis of his methodology. The author states here that “Formalism has become a dirty word in some domains of scholarship. . . . But a capacious formalism . . . has the happy outcome of renewing texts capacity to astonish [and] enables us to hear anew the cacophonous diversity of the addresses they make to the world” (p. 219). A traditional formalist approach would have been greatly appreciated given the paucity of such contributions on Edo literature. Formalism analyses only formal aspects of a work, and omits content interpretation to exclusively focus on the literary product. The author of *Writing Violence* is not bound by this dogmatic interpretation of formalism, however, as the text features extensive sections describing society and the influence it had on literary production. Moreover, he defines the term “form” as follows: “Elements that might more traditionally be classified as ‘content’: character types, *utamakura*, plot structures, the practice of *seppuku*” (pp. 6–7). Despite its concern with form, what is discussed in the book may be understood as manifestations of violence in literature, but not as Forms (Latin: *forma*; old Greek: *morphé* μορφή, hence morphology). The presence of the word “form” in the title would appear to be slightly misleading here.

Writing Violence is therefore something of a hybrid text. The choice to focus on the theme of violence rather than on genres is understandable, as this provides the opportunity to examine different genres and develop a more personal and less conventional methodology. The resultant approach enables Atherton to deal with different dimensions of literary works (social, intellectual, and political), rather than solely with their formal aspects. Nevertheless, I believe that a conventional formalistic approach with a structural and actantial analysis of each genre would have corroborated the meticulous survey conducted by the author and enabled him to document the effect that the various expressions of social and political

violence had on deep literary structures. In this sense, *Writing Violence* could have constituted a valuable contribution toward an interesting and underdeveloped field of study.

Leaving the question of formalism aside, however, *Writing Violence* is well-documented and a pleasure to read. It is an important contribution to the field, in particular due to its lively and detailed descriptions of social and ideological changes, and the influence they exerted on literary production. It should feature in courses on early modern Japanese literature.