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REVIEWS

Pleasure in Profit: Popular Prose in Seventeenth-Century Japan

By **Laura Moretti**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. xi, 416 pp. \$40.00.

Reviewed by
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Anglophone academic writings on early modern Japanese literature have hitherto focused on literary texts sandwiched between two major periods of urban cultural flowering: the Genroku (1688–1704) period and the Bunka-Bunsei period (1804–1809). Specifically, Genroku writers such as *ukiyo-zōshi* writer Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693), the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724) and the *haikai* poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) are often hailed (and taught) as foundational literary figures. It is in this context that Laura Moretti’s *Pleasure in Profit: Popular Prose in Seventeenth-Century Japan* is a welcome disruption to this established literary history. In her book, Moretti writes against the general dismissal of pre-Genroku popular literary works (broadly labeled as *kanazōshi*) as transitional in order to uncover what she calls “the Great Unread of popular seventeenth century Japanese prose” (7). According to her, traditional literary history sought to uncover early modern literary works that were forerunners to the modern novel (*shōsetsu*), and it is this teleological emphasis on novelistic aesthetics that had rendered works that



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do not fit in that category unworthy of academic study. Interestingly, Moretti's main targets of criticism were Richard Lane (1927–2002) and Noda Hisao (1913–2004), both of whom wrote their most important works in the 1960s and 1970s, a point which I will return to later in this review. Against Lane and Noda, and in line with Franco Moretti's "distant reading" as a mode of reading that took into account non-canonical works—which should be salient from her use of the phrase "the great unread"—her book attempts to present a non-teleological account of seventeenth-century popular literature from around the Kan'ei era (1624–1644) to the Genroku period, one that takes into consideration early modern material book cultures and reading practices.

Moretti's theoretical framework is an amalgamation of various methodological perspectives. At its core, it is new historicist in orientation, as the new historicist concept of "culture as text" is deployed to broaden our analytical lens to include material of all forms and media. This broadening allows Moretti to envisage a "literary space [that] has become richer and truly democratic," (8) one which "forces us to move beyond aesthetically pleasing fiction and to recover the other voices that have been silenced in previous literary histories" (11–12). It is in this context that Moretti introduces Louise M. Rosenblatt's distinction between "efferent reading" and "aesthetic reading," suggesting that while seventeenth-century popular literature encouraged both types of reading practices, efferent reading was the more common mode. This is the reason for the title of her book, which hints that the pleasure of reading laid in "the profit gained from acquiring knowledge" (20). Secondly, and as evident from her use of the concept of "distant reading," Moretti's approach is also comparative in nature, and she often makes references to reading and publishing practices in other historical and geographical contexts. While this is a laudable endeavor, this reader did notice instances when these comparative perspectives were used not for suggestive ends but explanatory ones, as they were deployed to justify certain interpretive choices made while close reading. The third perspective that is employed in the book is that of Nakano Mitsutoshi's *edojin no manako* (Edo people's eyes) which is "the retrieval of a lost early modern aesthetic" in order to study Edo from within (13). For Moretti, this perspective allows her to discover literary value in popular and vernacular works beyond their aesthetic nature, and to posit (as Nakano did) that the literary-didactic split (assumed by Noda and Lane) was alien to Edo period popular prose which, in the seventeenth century, often sought to popularize and translate

dominant ideologies or esoteric traditions for mass consumption. As Moretti's puts it herself: "My ultimate argument is to reclaim the place of knowledge-making texts at the very heart of literature" (20).

In chapter one, "The Culture of the Written Word," Moretti argues against the traditional association of literacy with the Tokugawa social structure of samurai-farmers-artisans-merchants. By providing circumstantial evidence, she suggests that there was widespread engagement with the written word in large sectors of society, stretching across categories of status and gender. Pointing out that with the sizable number of documents framing the abilities to read and write as "a new social must," Moretti argues that these texts "suggest that there was a growing expectation that people would engage with the written word without intermediaries" (30–31). In order to lay the groundwork for this assertion, she calls attention to the multiple co-eval literacies in the early modern period. According to Moretti, the level of an individual's literacy in the seventeenth century can be positioned on a spectrum between two basic kinds of learning. On the lower end, there was *tenarai* which, as its name implies (i. e., to learn with one's hands), refers to the acquiring of the rudimentary skills of writing and reading. On the higher end, there was *gakumon*, which refers to the advanced learning required to "grasp the correct way of things and to master ethical conduct" in order to become an all-rounded "human" in the Confucian sense of that word (52). Moretti then posits the two kinds of learning as belonging to opposite ends on a spectrum of multiple literacies, with *tenarai* corresponding to *kana-literacy* (which she also calls *wabun-literacy*), and *gakumon* to *kanbun* literacy. The chapter then turns its attention towards how book publishers in the 1660s, in order to bridge this conceptual divide between *kana-literacy* and *kanbun-literacy*, utilized specific textual strategies to allow novice readers access into *gakumon* and move up the social scale of literacy. One such strategy highlighted is that of *kundoku*, or the syntactical parsing of *kanbun* texts into "Japanese." As Moretti highlights, there was a shift in the 1660s away from "texts written mainly in *hiragana* to texts with a higher number of kanji but normally accompanied by *furigana* glosses" (61). While Moretti's argument is compelling, her positing of *kanbun* as "indeed a foreign written language" (54) makes this reader wonder how people living then would have thought about the form, since, by the 1600s, what we now call *kanbun* had already been used for centuries in Japan. To pose the problematic differently, I wonder if the dialectic of *wabun* as native and *kanbun* as foreign posited here brings in problematic

anachronistic assumptions not too different from the issue of national/cultural difference debated by nationalistic scholars (such as the linguist Hashimoto Shinkichi in his *Kokugo gairon* [1943]) of pre-1945 imperial Japan. As Kazama Seishi (1998) also hints in his writings on *wabun*, the concept itself was formulated by *kokugaku* scholars in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and any deployment should therefore take into account that historicity.

Chapter two, “The Publishing Business,” then builds on this discussion on literacy by providing a wealth of textual and pictorial material to further explore the publishing scene. By highlighting the physical socializing space that publishers create, Moretti maps the two main types of booksellers-publishers (since publishers at the time usually sell the books they print directly to end-users), and the corresponding kinds of books that are published by each type. On the one hand, there were *mono no hon'ya*, high-brow booksellers that mainly specialized in books in *kanbun*; on the other hand, there were *sōshiya* who primarily published popular fiction as well as books related to the puppet theater (*kusazōshi*). Moretti then gives a brief history of publishing in the three cities of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka and seeks to problematize the division between the two types of booksellers, showing how a larger number of booksellers—both *mono no hon'ya* and *sōshiya*—were involved with the publication of prose in the vernacular. Moretti questions the assumption that only social elites (such as the samurai, monks, and wealthy merchants) were the main patrons of these stores. Here, Moretti’s depth of knowledge reveals itself, as she not only gives a brief summary of the major booksellers in the cities; she also points out interesting aspects of how booksellers sought to reduce their production costs in a bid to produce affordable books. One noteworthy method was that of “textual compression” as publishers crammed as many characters into a page as possible by increasing the number of lines per half folio and number of characters per line into each vertical column, thereby being able to produce a more affordable product (by reducing the woodblocks and papers used). By highlighting the importance of publishers in the rendition of any literary text, Moretti then centers their importance in the analysis of seventeenth century authorship. As she claims: “An individual writes a text (that person could easily be left unnamed), but it is the publisher who brings it to fruition (that name is often recorded despite the lack of any law requiring this). [...] Publishers modified text, as well as paratext, to meet the needs of a continually evolving reading public, and readers were

invited to fully enjoy these shifts as an integral part of their textual experience.” (p. 85) The chapter then ends with a discussion of seventeenth-century publishing genres as epistemic tools utilized by booksellers not for taxonomical ends but rather for the simple reason of maximizing sales.

Chapter three sees Moretti deploying Nakano Mitsutoshi’s methodology utilizing publishing genres to reveal “Edo people’s eyes.” The main publishing genres investigated are that of *kana washo* (Japanese books in the vernacular), and *kana hōgo* (books that laid out basic Buddhist/Confucian ideas in *kana*). By investigating the two publishing genres, the chapter then explores “the aesthetics of appropriation at play in the commodification of Buddhism and Confucianism” in popular literature (99). One aim of the chapter, which is aptly titled “Negotiating the Way,” is to highlight how Buddhist and Confucian books were previously omitted from previous literary historical studies of Tokugawa Japan in spite of the fact that they made up more than half of the book market. Given such a large percentage of ‘didactic’ books, Moretti suggests that this is evidence for the existence of a stable (and sizable) readership for such material as well as a general urge amongst readers to become all-rounded humans. These motifs will frame her chapter as a whole, as Moretti close reads a wide selection of relatively unknown texts to elucidate the various creative “translative” processes that undergird the genres as seventeenth-century publishers “devised ways to package [Buddhist] sutras and [Confucian classics] into ‘cognitively exciting products that had the potential to appeal to diverse readerships’” (114). To give a sample of the texts analyzed, these included: Ejima Tamenobu’s (1635–1695) attempts (in *Mi no kagami* [1659] and *Rihi kagami* [1664]) to bring lofty Confucian principles down to the everyday level in order to show their applicability to the mundane; *Kannon-gyō wadan shō* (1661) which made the twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra accessible by adding commentary and everyday narratives; and comparing two versions of Suzuki Shōsan’s (1579–1655) *Inga monogatari*—one purportedly esoteric and the other its popular rendition. Through her readings, Moretti then puts on display the porous nature of the two publishing genres of *kana washo* and *kana hōgo*, and how these publishing genres “embodied the [bookseller’s] desire to commodify moral, religious, and to a certain extent civic knowledge” (131). Similar to her earlier chapters, Moretti cautions against taking these publishing genres as mere attempts of dominant

culture inculcating norms top-down, as she argues for the existence of a more democratic reading public.

Chapter four, “Civility Matters,” then follows the methodology of the previous chapter by examining another publishing genre: *shitsukekata-sho narabi ni ryōri-sho* (books on manners and cookery). In this chapter, Moretti builds on Eiko Ikegami’s research on the subject of early modern civility in Japan but problematizes the latter’s idea of “hierarchical civility” where codes of etiquette are in line with the operative ideology of the Tokugawa state. Guided by the studies of Anna Bryson and Keith Thomas on civility in early modern England, and Norbert Elias’ work on the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Moretti then offers a comparative approach to understanding civility. Specifically, Moretti appears eager to apply the egalitarian principle by deploying Thomas’ understanding that a “well-mannered person should extend to everyone the polite deference which had originally been reserved for superiors” (135). While being polite is not the same as treating everyone in a civilized manner, since what constitutes a civilized act in one geographical area at a given historical juncture was not necessarily the same as our common understanding of displaying polite mannerism, Moretti’s assertion that civility was deployed both in popular literature and the elite class as a goal that everyone can achieve was on point. In her readings of the Ogasawara school manuals, and their eventual popularization by publishers, Moretti interprets a tension she identifies “between a desire to make known secret traditions beyond the warrior elite, on the one hand, and on the other, the decision to address mainly those who work in military households,” as “a drive to democratize knowledge beyond any social hierarchy and a seemingly opposite choice to uphold social hierarchy in the training of servants that do not offend their masters with rude behavior” (140). According to Moretti, then, “seventeenth-century civility literature did not attempt to repress people through subjugation to a strictly hierarchal society” as “it provided individuals with modes for pleasing self-representation and with means to express themselves in ways beyond their social status” (149). Interestingly, this hypothesis of seventeenth-century civility literature possessing a democratizing, yet hierarchical function also emerged as Moretti investigated the genres of *nyosho* (books for women)—where there existed books (such as *Onna shikimoku* [Rules for women, 1660]) that addressed women across the four classes—and those relating to food culture, “where delicacies and ceremonial food occupy the same space as ordinary dishes, while secret traditions of knife ceremonies compete with

the quotidian of the household” (167). It is noteworthy that Moretti’s understanding of civility as a form of both hierarchical and egalitarian ideology (what she calls “nuanced”) is not that different from Ikegami’s “hierarchical civility.” As Louis Althusser (1971: 223) has highlighted in “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre” regarding the concept of ideology, such dominant ideas are first and foremost a kind of lived experience: “[w]hen we speak of ideology, we should know that ideology slides into all human activity, that it is identical with ‘lived’ experience of human existence itself. [...] This ‘lived’ experience is not a given, given by a pure ‘reality’, but the spontaneous ‘lived experience’ of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real.” When seen from this perspective of books on civility as attempts to promote such a lived experience (or in Moretti’s own words, a particular “embodied cultural capital”), Moretti’s disagreement with Ikegami’s “hierarchical civility” appears more a qualification of the latter’s stance than a true disagreement.

Chapter five, “Say It in a Skillful Letter,” then focuses on one particular method of embodying civility: that of obtaining necessary skills required in writing a letter, or what Moretti calls “letteracy.” Using books classified by the modern category of *ōraimono* (a broad category that encompasses all kinds of educational materials), Moretti shows how these books were intended and shaped by commercial publishers as manuals for basic literacy (*tenarai*). This chapter, therefore, fills a conspicuous gap in contemporary scholarship by examining not only the non-narrative manuals of epistolography but also how they were then used as narrative capital for subsequent narrative-centered books. Moretti’s close reading in this chapter is exemplary, as she focuses on both the content and the material form in which these books were published. In the section on female epistolary forms, for instance, Moretti not only spotlights the creation of a distinct female literary sentence-ending form she aptly names *mairase-sōrōbun*, she also puts on display the stylistic arrangement of sentences known as *chirashi-gaki* (scattered writing) in these exemplary letters. As men were expected to adopt feminine letteracy norms when writing to women, Moretti asserts that this practice “encourag[es] us to refrain from applying any easy, binary division between letteracy for men and letteracy for women” (190). The latter half of the chapter then focuses on close readings of three literary texts—*Usuyuki Monogatari* (1630s), *Usugumo monogatari* (1659) and *Nishikigi* (1661)—in a bid to show how this dimension of letteracy was deployed to promote efferent reading. Moretti’s intervention in this chapter is important, as it redefines the

position of Ihara Saikaku's epistolary works as *joining in* a longer and richer tradition instead of possessing a foundational role as modern (teleological) literary histories often postulate.

Chapter six, "A Commitment to the Present," then shifts gears from examining the "transformative" books of the previous chapters toward books that generated practical usable knowledge that "enabled readers to become *au courant* with those things that mattered in seventeenth-century society" (223). In the chapter's first half, Moretti examines books that taught people how to make and retain wealth. Reminiscent of the ideological examples on civility given in Chapter four, according to Moretti, these seventeenth-century popular prose works often promoted the ideology of frugality. As she claims, "frugality is depicted in a two-fold manner: on the one hand, saving is necessary for a small fortune to turn into conspicuous riches; on the other, it is celebrated as means to maintain the wealth acquired by the previous generations" (232). It is with this promotion of frugality across all (lower) classes that Moretti shows how "[S]eventeenth-century popular texts not only urge readers to accept the existence of poverty and find some value in it but also promote a culture of mutual acceptance between the rich and the poor" (233). In the second half, Moretti shifts focus onto disaster narratives. Using four main narrative texts, she shows their debt to Kamo no Chōmei's twelfth-century *Hōjōki* while elucidating how these texts attempted to deal with catastrophic events. According to her, disaster prose narratives display four tropes: they attempted to report news in a factual manner; placed catastrophes in a historical context using hyperbolic language; reemphasized the human tragedy (and therefore humanism) at the center of such narratives; and lastly allowed for people affected by the tragedies to cope with the trauma and eventually achieve closure. In line with the frame of efferent reading and comparative literature elaborated in the beginning of this review, Moretti utilizes psychoanalytic theories in order to show how disaster narratives allowed people to cope with their present by encouraging "acceptance and forgiveness [... while] help[ing] to alleviate emotional distress" (253).

Chapter seven, "The Triumph of Plurality," then rounds up the discussion by focusing on texts that include a multiplicity of messages and functions. According to Moretti, seventeenth-century popular books nurtured the practice of "discontinuous reading" which allowed their readers to read and select episodes that interested them, thereby engaging them at multiple levels through the "pastiche[s] of diverse contents" (270).

Showing how three such popular works promote an economy of information that traverse different (modern) generic boundaries (such as travel literature, *zuihitsu*, *ukiyo-zōshi*, etc.), she shows how these works allowed a seventeenth-century reader to “bring together passages [from different sections] that we view as somehow connected” while enjoying the overall linear trajectory of the narrative. Moretti then suggests that this is what Roland Barthes praises as “Textual ‘success.’” The epilogue then reiterates the main aims of each chapter while re-encapsulating her overall goal in *Pleasure in Profit*.

As a whole, *Pleasure in Profit* puts on display the generous amount of knowledge that Moretti has uncovered. It introduces numerous lesser-known textual and historical material that would benefit not only students, but also fellow researchers attempting to navigate the intricacies of early modern Japanese literature. Nevertheless, the framework of the work does raise specific questions. While the application of new historicism is commendable, caution should be exercised when accepting the new historicist assumption that popular literature promoted a pluralistic, democratic, and egalitarian literary space. In this sense, *Pleasure in Profit*'s constant dialectical push to cut across dichotomies and boundaries and to disavow hierarchies, as well as its targeting of the “grand-narratives” of Lane and Noda, resembles a (teleological) precursor to Karatani Kōjin's assertion that Edo was already post-modern, one that Carol Gluck has highlighted as “a new nativist narrative” (“The Invention of Edo,” in *Mirror of Modernity*, 1998, 273–276). While Moretti's text can hardly be described as nativist, it is perhaps this absence of historicity which undermines Moretti's attempts to substantively account for reading and publishing cultures in the seventeenth century. This recalls Frederick Jameson's disagreement in his “Marxism and Historicism” with new historicist approaches:

The poststructural attack on “historicism,” which emerges from a no less problematic affirmation of the priority ‘synchronic’ thought, can best be resumed [...] as a repudiation of two related and essentially *narrative* forms of analysis which can be termed the *genetic* and the *teleological* respectively. [...] What teleological thought reads as a narrative progression from a fallen present to a fully constituted future, genetic thought now displaces onto the past, constructing an imaginary past term as the evolutionary precursor of a fuller term which has historical existence (1980: 45).

In some senses, especially in her positing of the egalitarian and plural nature of seventeenth-century literary and letterary fields, Moretti's approach resembles Jameson's understanding of "genetic approach" while maintaining an emphasis on "synchronic thought." This explains Moretti's constant use of some kind of (modern) humanistic explanatory frame, a dimension that is more discernable in chapter six where humans, regardless of historical context and geography, all react to disasters in similar fashions, and the practice of storytelling is posited as the timeless practice par excellence in dealing with loss and trauma.

Moretti's ahistorical use of egalitarian humanism as an explanatory frame too casts doubt on her adoption of Nakano's *edojin no manako*. In a recent intellectual feud between Iikura Yōichi (a student of Nakano's) and the late Kigoshi Osamu, the latter challenged the former's conception of *kinsei-teki yomi* (lit. early modern-esque reading), claiming that "such a conception cannot be found anywhere and is merely an illusion" (*Report Kasama* 61 (2016): 89–93).

Kigoshi hints that due to our positionality in the present, all forms of reading can only be a kind of *kindai-teki yomi* (modern-esque reading) since we bring into our readings presumptions that might not have been present in the eyes of someone living in Edo. Kigoshi then points to the fact that any such postulation of the possibility of *kinsei-teki yomi* or possessing *edojin no manako* often presupposes that the implied reader of early modern texts was also an ideal reader, one who possesses the knowledge that "we" (as researchers) came to adopt through extended periods of studying the early modern period. Although Kigoshi's disagreement was with Iikura, his arguments can also be applied to the attempt by Nakano to figure an *edojin no manako*. Consequently, we can question Moretti's interpretative choices in her close readings of publishing genres and texts. Nevertheless, I do want to state outright that while I sympathize with the conceptual aim of Moretti's adoption of Nakano's methodology—which seeks to view early modern literature on its own terms—I agree with Kigoshi that we should exercise caution in assuming that we can possess any such gaze in the first place.

In conclusion, *Pleasure in Profit* is an intellectual achievement. In spite of my reservations (some of which were admittedly harsh), Moretti has provided us with a succinctly well-researched and well-written entry into the "great unread" of the seventeenth-century popular prose. This work will no doubt be foundational in this immensely rich yet under-researched period in literary history.