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A Benkei for Every Age: Musashibō Benkei as Palimpsest

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Countless forgettable novels have been produced and their uncounted protagonists lost to the disinterest of history.[1] Occasionally, however, literary characters come to possess a certain longevity or staying power in the culture that produces them (and beyond, if they are translated). These characters—and the texts they come from—often become cultural mainstays for centuries, not only remembered or preserved but active in the national cultures in which they were produced and even spreading into international cultural milieus. They become integral to the "shared meanings" that Stuart Hall argues link constituent members of a culture (any culture), getting caught up again and again in the "circuit of culture."[2] They become household names, and nearly every constituent member of a culture is at least somewhat familiar with them. However, characters like these rarely achieve this longevity in pure form, perfectly preserved from the time of their inception to the present. It is rather precisely because these characters become the subjects of myriad rewritings, restagings, parody, and pastiche that they continually cycle through culture, gaining new relevance and engaging new audiences as they are reimagined at different points in time.[3] Hercules and Romeo and Juliet are two examples that come to mind. The current image of Hercules probably owes as much to Kevin Sorbo's muscular portrayal of him in sleeveless shirts in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) and Disney's animated *Hercules* (1997) as it does to Euripides. But note that Kevin Sorbo's rendition did not delete or overwrite Euripides' play or other ancient Greek texts. When considering Romeo and Juliet one can have an image of them as Renaissance Italians as in Shakespeare's original, while simultaneously appreciating them as twentieth-century New Yorkers in *West Side Story* (1961) or Los Angeleans in Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996),

both of which relocated the story to the contemporary United States and made the main characters modern American youths.

I argue such characters can be understood conceptually as palimpsests. The word originally refers to scriptures or documents from the European Middle Ages that were erased and overwritten. Vellum, or parchment paper, was an expensive commodity, so when a document was no longer needed it would not be discarded, but the existing writing would be scraped off or erased and the vellum reused. This erasure, however, was usually imperfect, and traces of the original writing remained; layers of text underneath the more prominent, recent rewriting. This practice has been generalized from its original context to conceptualize two or more texts which are layered on top of one another, superimposed, or intertwined. Gérard Genette chooses the palimpsest as the model for his investigation of relations between texts. Most pertinent here is his concept of "hypertextuality," which is "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary."[4] Genette argues that any hypertext (a text grafted onto an earlier text) is literature as palimpsest, and our reading of such texts is described by a delightful portmanteau coined by Philippe Lejeune: "palimpsestuous." [5] Sarah Dillon further describes the texts in the palimpsest as "involuted." This term "describes the relationship between the texts that inhabit the palimpsest as a result of the process of palimpsesting and subsequent textual reappearance. The palimpsest is an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other."[6] The process of superimposition or layering in the palimpsest, then, mixes texts together and they come to us, the readers, as an involuted whole, hopelessly entangled with one another.

Linda Hutcheon writes of adaptation that "we experience adaptations … as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation." [7] I agree, but would extend this palimpsestuous reading and involution of texts beyond the direct adaptations of texts Hutcheon is describing (in the manner of *West Side Story* adapting *Romeo and Juliet*), to argue that enduring literary characters like Hercules and Romeo and Juliet themselves become the site of palimpsest. Even though *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* invented much new material for its four-year run that is not a direct adaptation of classical Greek myth, the show still contributed to the Hercules

palimpsest.[8] The way these characters are understood—their personalities, possibilities, their relevance to our lives, etc.—is formed from a bricolage of involuted texts. They are palimpsests, made up of multiple layers of reworking and reimagining that any such character undergoes when remaining in currency in a given culture for a long enough time. Each new play or novel or film reads from this composite image, reinterprets the character, and writes its own version in turn back onto the multilayered palimpsest of that character. All these layers remain available for consideration in isolation (assuming the texts still survive), just as we can always go back to Shakespeare's original *Romeo and Juliet.* (Although Hutcheon notes astutely that these earlier works are "haunted at all times by their adapted texts.")[9] But these characters come to readers involuted, with multiple (sometimes contradictory) interpretations and possibilities from multiple moments of textual production simultaneously present. These characters are, in Hutcheon's term, "multilaminated," consisting of multiple layers, each of which represents a particular moment of textual creation that responded to the social, economic, and political trends of its time.[10] These enduring characters, therefore, contain a richly layered cultural history, as each new text that drew from the palimpsest reimagined the character responding to the tastes, needs, and projects of its historical moment, and wrote that interpretation back onto the palimpsest in turn.

Musashibō Benkei 武蔵坊弁慶 is one such character. Although he is well known as the right-hand man of the historical Minamoto no Yoshitsune 源義経(1159–1189), the brilliant general that led the Genji clan to victory in the Genpei Civil War 源平合戦 of 1180–1185, Benkei himself is fictional, emerging in stories surrounding Yoshitsune and the Genpei War starting in the fourteenth century. Benkei is a compelling character. He is a brash, irreverent strongman attached to the remarkable and sympathetic Yoshitsune and the exciting events of the Genpei War, as well as the later drama of Yoshitsune's betrayal by his brother and flight across Japan. Consequently, he is one of those characters that has been subject to countless reworkings and reimaginings, and has consequently remained current in Japanese culture for several centuries. The Benkei we can appreciate today is, therefore, a palimpsest of writings that began in the fourteenth century and have continued, layer by layer, up to the present. This article attempts to read through the Benkei palimpsest, but not merely to uncover older Benkei texts or tease out layers of interpretation. It is rather engaged in what Dillon calls a genealogical reading, "a form of palimpsestuous reading that does not focus solely on the underlying text,

for to do so would be to unravel and destroy the palimpsest, which exists only and precisely as the involution of texts. Rather, such reading seeks to trace the incestuous and encrypted texts that constitute the palimpsest's fabric."[11] The purpose here, then, is to show how Benkei was transformed by and appropriated for the sociopolitical projects of various moments of rewriting and, more importantly, to show how each involuted layer contributes to the palimpsest called "Benkei," adding its unique interpretation of his literary possibilities to the overall composite image.

Certainly, any number of characters could be examined in this way (it would be rather hard to find a 700-year-old character who is not a palimpsest). I choose Benkei because he is a productively liminal character; a commoner who rubs elbows with generals and emperors, a faithless criminal who swears absolute loyalty to his liege, a monk who is also a warrior, among other things. Roberta Strippoli posits him as a classic "trickster" character, poised between order and chaos, nature and culture.[12] Thus Benkei is polyvalent, operating in (and useful for commentary on) several social spheres. Benkei is also liminal in another way; he is a fictional character attached to real historical people and events. Therefore, he has no exact historical facts attached to him that must be countenanced, and could be freely imagined, reimagined, appropriated, and reworked according to the needs and tastes of many moments of textual creation. Yet he is deeply implicated in real historical narratives, and therefore these free reimaginings could be used to open up history to new commentary and possibilities.

This article traces the history of Benkei production and examines how various significant Benkei texts contribute to the Benkei palimpsest in which they become involuted. Each new instance of Benkei production does not erase or overwrite the previous instances, but rather adds another layer to the palimpsest that makes up the composite image "Benkei." This article is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of Benkei works (that would be a Herculean task, especially since he was a regular feature in Edo-period popular plays), nor is it particularly an attempt to unearth obscure Benkei works. Instead, with classroom use in mind, the article addresses relatively well-known texts mostly available in English translation to show how literature and literary characters can be adapted and transformed over an extended time frame. It examines these texts as layers in the Benkei palimpsest, revealing that far from a stable character, Benkei is a shifting, changing image responsive to historicized cultural environments. Finally, this article argues that these Benkei texts have all

become palimpsestuous, inextricably tangled together with each other to produce the image of Benkei available today, which (we will see) derives its literary possibilities from a profoundly historicized process of textual layering in the Benkei palimpsest.

Musashibō Benkei

Who is Benkei? Texts differ in their characterization of Benkei, but a few common elements are shared among most. Benkei is physically strong and burly. He is a *sōhei* 僧兵, a warrior monk. Such monks defended powerful temples and their income-generating estates from covetous emperors and samurai, and had become a major military force by the end of the Heian period (794–1185) when Benkei was said to have lived.[13] As a monk he is also highly literate, and possesses considerable ability in Buddhist religious arts. He is clever and quick-thinking, and sometimes is attributed with several other skills as well. Benkei is wild and fierce, but also extremely loyal to Yoshitsune. Although his wild antics sometimes get out of hand, they are usually in service to his master. Benkei swears fealty to Yoshitsune when the latter is still a boy and fights alongside the victorious Yoshitsune in the Genpei War. Later, Yoshitsune's brother, Minamoto no Yoritomo 源頼朝 (1147–1199), begins to fear Yoshitsune's popularity and orders that he be executed. When Yoshitsune flees to a refuge in the north, Benkei accompanies him and helps his master avoid detection as they travel. Finally, when they are at last confronted by Yoritomo's troops, Benkei fights to the death defending Yoshitsune.

Several vignettes of the Benkei story have emerged as significant sources for later reimagining: first, the young Benkei terrorizes Kyoto, defeating passing samurai and collecting their swords—999 of them, in most texts—until Yoshitsune defeats him, thereby winning his loyalty. Second, while fleeing Yoritomo's executioners, Yoshitsune's boat is assaulted by the angry ghost of the Heike dead, which Benkei must stave off with his religious powers. Third, in order to avoid detection at a road barrier crossing while they are traveling incognito, Benkei must use his wits to outsmart suspicious guards, and beats his own master. Fourth and finally, Benkei is killed by arrows from Yoritomo's army, but remains standing even in death, bristling with arrows, giving Yoshitsune time to finish committing suicide and thereby serving his master even in death. These are the most well-known parts of Benkei's story, and have been used and reused in plays, movies, and even comic books.

Early Benkei Texts—The First Layer

Musashibō Benkei is barely mentioned in *The Tale of the Heike* (Heike monogatari 平家物語), the most widely read account of the Genpei War. His name comes up a few times when the narrative provides long lists of Yoshitsune's retainers who are present in a certain place or rush to Yoshitsune's aid on various occasions. Benkei's name invariably appears at the end of such lists, with no embellishment, and no martial accomplishments to his name.[14] Benkei is fleshed out a little in *The Rise and Fall of the Genji and Heike (*Genpei jōsuiki 源平盛衰記), another account of the Genpei War from the fourteenth century. Some familiar elements of Benkei begin to emerge here: a warrior monk wielding a *naginata* 薙刀 (halberd) who engages in some buffoonery and can read scriptures.[15] There is also a short but important episode in which Benkei understands implicitly what Yoshitsune means when he cryptically calls for a "great torch" to be lit (examined below), presaging the trust and special relationship between the two of them that later texts will develop. Ultimately, however, *The Rise and Fall of the Genji and Heike* offers very little treatment of him, providing only the barest outline of Benkei. These are the narratives of the Genpei War regarded as the most historically accurate, but Benkei is hardly mentioned in them.

Benkei begins to emerge in stories about Yoshitsune from the Muromachi period (1336–1573),[16] possibly based on one or more warrior monks who actually accompanied Yoshitsune in his northward journey (although it is impossible to know for sure).[17] Benkei appears in a multitude of *otogi-zōshi* 御伽草子 ("companion tales," short, usually didactic stories), *kōwakamai* 幸若舞 (popular dance-ballads), nō plays 能楽, and *monogatari* 物語 (long-form narratives). It is impossible to date most of these stories, but Hellen McCullough speculates that Benkei's appearance in the barrier-crossing story predated most of the other vignettes, and his earlier life was written later in order to account for the origins of such an imposing figure and how he came to serve Yoshitsune.[18]

Many of these disparate tales were collected into a cohesive narrative in the *Gikeiki* 義経記 (Record of Yoshitsune), written by an anonymous author probably sometime in the late fourteenth century. The first half describes Yoshitsune's (fictionalized) life as a youth, before his military career, while the second half describes his flight through the countryside with only a handful of retainers after Yoritomo declared him *persona non grata.* The *Gikeiki* is the most significant source text of Benkei stories, and for most stories of Yoshitsune outside of his military career. Although the

title might seem to indicate that the text is primarily about Yoshitsune, the events of the Genpei War—when Yoshitsune achieved his many accomplishments as a military general—are skipped over, probably because they are sufficiently recounted in other texts. Instead, it is Benkei who plays the most prominent role in most of the famous episodes surrounding Yoshitsune in this text, and a quarter of the first section is devoted solely to Benkei's early life. In fact, in striking contrast to the *Heike,* Yoshitsune in the *Gikeiki* is transformed into a passive character, probably because his character was in the process of being idealized as aristocratic and refined, and various acts of violence were deemed inappropriate for such a character and transferred to Benkei instead.[19] So by the fourteenth century we see Benkei emerge as the principal character in his putative master's story.

Therefore, I will examine the *Gikeiki*—along with the fourteenth century nō plays mentioned below—as the first layer of texts in the Benkei palimpsest, the initial layer that establishes the preliminary literary possibilities that come to be associated with Benkei. The Benkei narrative in its various incarnations in the fourteenth century is illustrative of *gekokujō* 下克上 literature, a literary trend prominent during the Muromachi period when the Benkei legend was formed. *Gekokujō* literally means "the low conquering the high." Although the term might seem to have Marxist overtones to modern readers, it was primarily an expression of anxieties surrounding the social, political, and economic instability that repeated wars and new patterns of commerce and production had wrought in the Muromachi period. The term already appears in the *Genpei jōsuiki*, which explains it with the apt metaphor of a mouse nesting in a horse's tail: "A mouse, which should not climb [in the world], rises up, while a horse, which should not be violated, is where the mouse makes its nest and births its children. This is *gekokujō*."[20] This is a clear expression of the anxieties surrounding *gekokujō;* a breakdown of order has allowed a pest animal to rise above its station and get an advantage over a valuable work animal. Nevertheless, in its instability *gekokujō* did contain the possibilities for a kind of social mobility. Pierre-François Souyri suggests "we might also translate this expression as 'revolution,' in the sense not of a great social upheaval but of an age-old movement constantly challenging state or regional powers, an attempt by the lower classes to reject the inevitability of their condition when the ruling classes proved incapable of maintaining stable institutions." [21] *Gekokujō* could refer to samurai retainers taking power from their masters, the acquisition of wealth by the

poor or social status by the humble, or any other overturning of fixed socioeconomic hierarchies.[22]

The *Gikeiki* was written during this period and appropriately contains a strong *gekokujō* theme. That theme is realized not in Yoshitsune himself (who despite having a rough childhood was, after all, the scion of a powerful samurai clan), but rather in his lowly retainer Benkei, who rises from low birth to the center of power, eventually—in the *Gikeiki* and associated legends—rising above Yoshitsune himself in some ways (although he always remains his firmly loyal retainer in the official hierarchy). Benkei in the *Gikeiki* is conceived in an illicit affair between an abbot and a lady he kidnaps. He is born with teeth and hair and already as large as a child of two or three.[23] His father, thinking he must be an ugly demon, abandons him, but Benkei is rescued by an aunt who raises him until he can be sent to a monastery. He is actually quite adept at monastic studies and acquires literacy and religious knowledge, but his penchant for brawling with other monks eventually gets him expelled from the monastery.

Benkei is, therefore, an illegitimate child who is abandoned to a monastery and becomes a kind of juvenile delinquent. Strippoli notes that Benkei's abnormal birth contains echoes of the birth legends of the historical Buddha and the Taoist sage Laozi, who, like Benkei, were born after long pregnancies and already strangely developed.[24] However, Strippoli is probably right that Benkei's birth story is a parody of such sacred births, rather than a serious indication of some innate holiness, as his personality, appearance, and actions are entirely at odds with such auspicious holy men.[25] He is a commoner of low birth, neither a descendant of the imperial aristocracy nor a member of the ascendant samurai clans, or even a well-off townsman. His religious vocation might seem to afford him a respectable social position at first glance, but his status was probably more akin to an illiterate laborer. While medieval temples certainly had scholar-monks devoted to meditation and enlightenment, they also housed many more *dōshu* 堂衆, people who had taken monastic vows but were often uneducated and illiterate and were employed by the temple for manual labor rather than religious duties. Given Benkei's perfunctory upbringing, early tonsure, and physical burliness, he appears closer to a *dōshu* than to a scholar-monk, albeit one who was able to obtain literacy and knowledge of the sutras above his station. Mikael Adolphson has noted that the *Genpei jōsuiki* contains a record of *dōshu* who assisted scholar-monks and went on to perform

Buddhist services on their own, even collecting fees, appropriating the rights and challenging the interests of the scholar-monks.[26] Of course, this is characteristic of a *gekokujō* world, and like the *dōshu* of the *Genpei jōsuiki*, Benkei also manages to appropriate religious and educational skills normally above his class. While Benkei is often called a *sōhei,* or warrior monk, Adolphson argues that such clear-cut differentiation between classes of monks is an invention of later observers, and that the *dōshu*, as a large temple labor force, sometimes took up arms for their temple as well, and indeed there are several records of *dōshu* engaged in armed conflict.[27] So while Benkei may be a monk, he is most likely a *dōshu,* the lowest rank of monk used for menial labor who happened to take up weapons. He is certainly not one of the educated scholar-monks who composed poetry with aristocratic courtiers. This means that in effect, the *Gikeiki* and other contemporary tales about Benkei describe a man of very low station who rises to rub elbows with those at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy thanks to his own acquired abilities.

Fujiwara Shigekazu argues that one major thematic axis of the *Gikeiki* is the celebration of Benkei's many *gei* 芸, "arts" or "skills," both practical and humanistic. This is itself an expression of the socio-politically unstable *gekokujō* world of the Muromachi period, when those of traditionally low status found themselves able to advance socially and economically through trades and skills. Fujiwara writes:

> Readers who felt suspense from the trials that followed one after another surely felt gratified when they could applaud the power of the skills that overcame them. That spirit is what created Benkei: a master of many skills, a warrior who nonetheless can sing, a barbarian who is nonetheless refined, a mixture of the vulgar and elegant. With the creation of Benkei the skills displayed in the *Gikeiki* expand from the narrow realm of military skills to include humanistic skills as well. This was born from the mentality of the residents of the capital who held the East in contempt and disliked samurai who flaunted their authority, the so-called "Muromachi spirit" [*muromachi-gokoro* 室町心]…

This story was created in an era when the world was uncertain: a world of *gekokujō* where one could only rely on one's own power and the power of one's skills. Benkei and Yoshitsune's other retainers live by the strength of their military skills…. And Benkei's odd appearance, with seven tools on his back, was truly the symbol of a free man living by his own skills. The people of the capital liked the guerrilla way of life of these samurai

unbeholden to anyone, and their hopes created a man who lives by his skills.[28]

As Fujiwara notes, Benkei—often depicted carrying various tools in prints and paintings, such as a saw, axe, and mallet—embodies a hodgepodge of skills (military, technical, humanistic) that were increasingly important for social mobility as the economy was diversifying in the Muromachi period and new opportunities were arising for commoners to acquire wealth through skilled labor outside of traditional agricultural estates or aristocratic patronage.[29] The episodes in the Benkei story discussed below are significant not only because Benkei transgresses class hierarchy and betters his own master, but because he does so through the merit of skills he acquired despite his low birth. In this, Benkei reflected the *gekokujō* trends in Muromachi society, and perhaps the aspirations of contemporary commoner audiences.

While Benkei is hardly the only literary/historical character to transgress class boundaries, he is one of the few who starts so low and successfully rises so high. For example, the *Heike* depicts another monk, Mongaku 文覚 (1139–1203) (interestingly also associated with a subscription list—see below), bursting into the residence of a retired emperor to demand donations, and even fighting those dispatched to apprehend him. However, Mongaku is the son of a minor court aristocrat; while certainly not of high enough breeding to be in the emperor's presence, he is nonetheless of the aristocratic class. The *Heike* also details the many religious austerities he undertakes, signaling that he is a higher class of monk with serious religious ambitions. And for his brief transgression, Mongaku is exiled from the capital.[30] Benkei, on the other hand, is born a deformed, unwanted child, joins the lowest ranks of temple laborers, and is exiled from even that lowly company to become a brigand. Nonetheless, he is able to become the right-hand man of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a brilliant general and refined imperial descendant with an imperial appointment. In his capacity as Yoshitsune's most trusted retainer, he is routinely placed above other retainers, even though many are samurai from dignified lineages, and he often gets the chance to fight samurai with both weapons and wits. This *gekokujō* theme is strongly apparent in several vignettes from the *Gikeiki* discussed below that were adopted into nō plays in the medieval period. Not coincidentally, these vignettes become the most important parts of the Benkei story for later adaptation, making them the first layer of the Benkei palimpsest, the hypotext for most later hypertexts.

Funa Benkei

The *Funa Benkei* 船弁慶 (Benkei on a ship) plot, which appears in the *Gikeiki* and is the source of a popular nō play, occurs shortly after Yoshitsune has fallen out of favor with his brother and is on the run. As he and his party try to sail to Shikoku, they are confronted with a storm that has been generated by the angry ghosts of Heike warriors who drowned in the naval battle at Dan no Ura 壇ノ浦 (1185). Yoshitsune, however, refuses to believe there is a threat, and Benkei must save his master not only from the ghosts but from his own foolishness as well. Benkei defeats the ghosts using his religious powers, although the exact method varies in different versions of the story.

In the *Gikeiki* version, Benkei warns Yoshitsune about the threat but his master dismissively replies "nonsense!" Benkei responds as if he were scolding a child: "You have regretted not listening to my advice in the past." He then proceeds to declare his own power: "I am going to shoot at that cloud. If it is only a plaything of the winds, my arrows won't hurt it; but if it is the spirits of the Taira dead, it will be powerless to resist me - that is the law of heaven."[31] Subsequently, he announces his own name, taking care to distinguish himself as more than a retainer of Yoshitsune: "Though I am but a retainer of the Genji, I have a proper name of my own. I am Saitō Musashibō Benkei, the son of the Kumano abbot Benshō, who traces his ancestry to Amatsukoyane!"[32] Finally he shoots arrows at the cloud, causing it to vanish. Here Benkei is portrayed as competent and powerful, boldly stating his own name to the ghosts and dispatching them with ease while scolding his own master. That master, by contrast, is powerless to confront a supernatural menace, and not competent enough to even realize that there is a threat in the first place.

In the nō play *Funa Benkei* (date unknown) this *gekokujō* dynamic becomes more apparent. This play and *Ataka* (examined below) were written by Kanze Nobumitsu 観世信光 (1435–1516), and are examples of *furyū* 風流 (spectacle) nō, which—unlike the more elegant *mugen* 夢幻 (dreamlike) nō—is characterized by more props, elaborate costumes, and dynamic action.[33] These plays have not generally been held in high esteem by modern critics, but they reflect changes in nō tastes after the Ōnin War 応仁の乱 (1467–1477), when troupes increasingly began to venture outside the capital and audiences became more socially, politically, economically, and geographically marginal.[34] Perhaps this new audience is one reason Nobumitsu wrote Benkei plays with *gekokujō* themes.

In the nō play *Funa Benkei*, the difference between Yoshitsune's and Benkei's appreciation of the danger facing them is more pronounced. Even when Benkei spots the Heike ghosts (which the nō play transforms from clouds to ghostly forms), Yoshitsune tells him "there is no need to be alarmed. Though evil spirits resolve to destroy us, what harm could they possibly do?"[35] When the ghost of the fallen Heike general Tomomori 平知盛 (1152–1185) reveals his identity, "Yoshitsune, wholly untroubled, draws his sword as though true flesh and blood challenged him to fight."[36] Benkei must throw himself between the two to rescue Yoshitsune, and he drives off the ghost in a great display of his religious strength:

> Rasping his prayer beads against one another
> he summons the Five Mantra Kings:
> in the east Gōsanze, in the south Gundari-yasha,
> in the west Daiitoku, in the west [sic] Kongō-yasha,
> in the centre Lord Fudō:
> the Mantra King whose noose binds evil powers!
> Fiercely he prays until the baleful spirit
> step by step falls back.[37]

Yoshitsune is not only incapable of dealing with the danger, he fails even to understand it. He draws his sword, perhaps showing him to be a typical samurai who thinks he can resolve any problem with physical force. Benkei, on the other hand, fully comprehends the danger and deals with it competently. Significantly, he uses his humanistic *gei* (in this case his religious knowledge and practice) to defeat the ghosts and increase his stature. On stage, the role of Yoshitsune is played by a child actor, whereas Benkei is played by an adult. While this is a nō convention when portraying emperors or high-ranking figures (in order to make such characters seem more beautiful and elegant) it creates a strong contrast with the impressive Benkei.[38] Although the use of a child actor does imbue Yoshitsune with an aristocratic sacredness, at the same time it makes it hard to imagine the character commanding the adults around him. His power as a general is deemphasized, and the adult Benkei resembles a protective parent more than a loyal retainer, accentuating the difference in power between them. Laurence Kominz has noted that "in the source episodes for [*Funa Benkei* and *Ataka*], Yoshitsune is a gentle aristocrat, but the authors of the *nō* plays were unwilling or unable to put such a character on equal footing with the powerful Benkei. In both plays child actors take the part of Yoshitsune. The contrast in physical strength

between Yoshitsune and Benkei is thus made very clear… Yoshitsune is very much in the background in both plays."[39] Yoshitsune also exhibits exceptional deference to Benkei in the play; when Benkei demands Yoshitsune leave behind his lover, Shizuka, Yoshitsune merely says "In this matter, Benkei, do as you think best."[40] Benkei is both wiser and more effective than his master, who is depicted as naïve, ineffective, and is played by a child. In this way, the text elevates Benkei above his own master, a fine example of the socially low overcoming the socially high, at least momentarily in stature on stage.

Hashi Benkei

The nō play *Hashi Benkei* 橋弁慶 (Benkei on a bridge, author unknown, date unknown) features the young Yoshitsune (then named Ushiwaka 牛若), a boy of eleven or twelve, haunting the Gojō Bridge in Kyoto, extracting his revenge against the Taira by attacking the Heike samurai who happen to cross the bridge, killing them, and taking their swords as trophies.[41] After collecting 999 swords, he is confronted by the stout, imposing Benkei. They fight, but despite the differences in their size and strength Yoshitsune is able to defeat him. Benkei, realizing he has found a worthy master, swears fealty to Yoshitsune on the spot, beginning their storied relationship. Contemporary *otogi-zōshi* featuring the *Hashi Benkei* plot also have the same structure.[42] However, in the *Gikeiki* and some other texts such as *Benkei monogatari* it is instead Benkei who stalks the streets of Kyoto and kills 999 samurai (although not on the Gojō bridge).[43]

Helen McCullough speculates that the killing of a thousand men was transferred to Benkei in later versions because "such indiscriminate slaughter, while conceivable on the part of an outlaw monk, finally proved incompatible with Yoshitsune's highly idealized character."[44] As mentioned above, Yoshitsune, although his reputation was fundamentally rooted in warfare and bloodshed, became increasingly idealized as refined and aristocratic over time. Yoshitsune's violence and military record were inextricably entangled with the Yoshitsune legend and could not be erased, so in order to resolve the contradiction between Yoshitsune's martial prowess and his increasingly refined character, incidents of violence were transferred to Benkei instead. Benkei is a convenient target for such transference because he is a fictional character and—unlike Yoshitsune's other retainers—does not have any underlying historical reality that must be countenanced. This transference, however convenient for the refinement of Yoshitsune's character, means that Benkei became credited

with the military skills and feats of courage and daring that had been the hallmark of Yoshitsune's greatness.

Here again we see a *gekokujō* element, as Benkei (textually) appropriates one of the military accomplishments that had been part of his samurai master's reputation. Benkei is not a samurai but an outcast juvenile delinquent, bandit, and monk of the lowest order. This transference ascribes to a commoner the combat skills of a samurai prodigy: the ability to best a thousand samurai. Since Benkei was not born into a samurai family and seems to have taught himself how to fight (aided, certainly, by his legendary size and strength), this is another example of Benkei transgressing class boundaries and moving above his station based on his *gei*: his self-taught military skills, in this case. Benkei not only displays more martial prowess than his own master, but defeats many samurai wandering through the capital; that is to say, he defeats his betters and political masters. The transference of the slaughter of samurai in the *Hashi Benkei* story is a literal example of *gekokujō,* the low conquering the high.

Ataka

Perhaps the most well-known and celebrated story in the *Benkei* narrative is that of Benkei beating Yoshitsune in order to allay suspicions of their party as they flee north. In the nō play *Ataka* 安宅 (Kanze Nobumitsu, date unknown) this incident occurs at the Ataka road barrier, while in the *Gikeiki* it occurs at a river crossing. Nonetheless, the elements of the story are the same. Yoshitsune's party is disguised as *yamabushi* 山伏 (mountain ascetics), but Yoshitsune himself draws suspicion from the guards or the ferryman, and Benkei must beat him mercilessly in order to convince the guards he cannot be Yoshitsune, since no one would ever think of doing such a thing to his own feudal master. In the *Gikeiki,* when the ferryman remarks that one of the monks (who is in fact Yoshitsune) resembles Yoshitsune, Benkei's response is dramatic:

> Benkei leaped angrily onto the gunwale of the boat, seized his master's arm, hoisted him over his shoulder, and jumped to the beach. Then he dumped him roughly onto the sand and with a fan which he pulled from his waist began to beat him so mercilessly that the onlookers averted their eyes.[45]

The core of the nō play *Ataka,* one of the most popular nō plays even today, is much the same. The group is about to be allowed through the

Ataka road barrier when a guard recognizes Yoshitsune. Benkei reacts swiftly:

> To look like Lord Hōgan [Yoshitsune][46] will be the memory of a lifetime for this stupid fellow! How angry I am! While the sun was still high, I thought we could stretch our legs and get on to Noto. But here you drag along behind us, though you carry such a light box. That's why people suspect you... Lately, I've become more and more disgusted with you. I must teach you a lesson. Snatching up the diamond staff, he beats him repeatedly, crying out, "Pass on, I say!"[47]

Here a low character, Benkei, belittles and beats Yoshitsune, his own feudal master and a samurai general, an unthinkable action that completely upends social hierarchy. Naturally, this is only permissible because it is necessary to protect Yoshitsune. In both versions, Benkei begs his master for forgiveness afterward and Yoshitsune grants it, reincorporating this transgressive moment into accepted class hierarchies. Nonetheless Benkei beating Yoshitsune, a momentary *gekokujō* act of class transgression, is clearly the dramatic focus. Other well-known elements of the scene, such as the barrier guard realizing he has found Yoshitsune but allowing the party to pass because he is so moved by Benkei's loyalty, are later innovations. In the nō play Yoshitsune is again played by a child actor, emphasizing the contrast with Benkei as discussed above. Furthermore, while the *Gikeiki* has Yoshitsune disguised as a monk (and therefore on equal terms with Benkei), the nō play downgrades his disguise to that of a mere baggage carrier, creating the transient surface impression of a samurai reduced to a menial laborer, while his retainer is elevated to his master. This is, of course, just a disguise and the normal social hierarchy actually remains intact, but the play allows audiences to see a carnivalesque temporary reversal of roles. Although it is difficult to pin down a progression in narrative iterations since the date of the *Gikeiki*'s authorship is uncertain, it is likely that the *Gikeiki* predated *Ataka* and may have been used as a source for the play.[48] If so, the power differential between Benkei and Yoshitsune was increased through narrative iterations as the Muromachi period advanced. The nō play also adds to the *Gikeiki* version the innovation of Benkei "reading" aloud a blank scroll to convince the barrier guards the party really is a group of monks traveling to solicit donations, making up the complicated religious language of such scrolls on the spot. To the original story of violent class transgression, then,

Ataka adds another instance of Benkei overcoming obstacles with his more humanistic, religious *gei.* Of course, this transgression is only momentary, and it must be sublimated back into the accepted social order as Benkei apologizes to Yoshitsune and is forgiven. Yoshitsune has the power to forgive transgressions, a reminder of his ultimate social superiority. But it is Benkei who has the power of transgressive violence due to his strength, education, and skills. It is an extraordinary moment of power reversal, even if Benkei must be reincorporated back into the normal class hierarchy at the end.

Therefore, Benkei in the *Gikeiki,* nō plays, and various other contemporaneous texts responds to certain socioeconomic currents at the time of their creation in the Muromachi period, especially *gekokujō,* the transgression of class boundaries and a certain kind of social mobility newly possible in the politically unstable Muromachi world. Benkei rises from lowly status to become the great Yoshitsune's most trusted retainer, and later even seems to rise above Yoshitsune. He accomplishes this on the strength of his many *gei*, the skills that were increasingly enabling commoners to improve their economic and social positions in the unstable Muromachi order. Furthermore, since he defeats scores of samurai in order to protect someone persecuted by the Kamakura shogunate, Benkei may even be an expression of anti-shogunate sentiment that was mounting during the Muromachi period as well.[49] As a fictional character attached to the historical life of Yoshitsune, Benkei could be written and molded to insert Muromachi cultural concerns into that dramatic historical narrative of the late Heian period. This iteration of Benkei—"*gekokujō* Benkei" or "transgressive Benkei"—becomes the first layer in the Benkei palimpsest. This may be surprising to readers familiar with Benkei today, when he is well known as an exemplar of feudal loyalty; upholding and conforming to class hierarchies rather than transgressing them. However, this characterization is a more recent layer in the Benkei palimpsest, as will be discussed below. Benkei is reimagined and rewritten as the ideal loyal retainer (among other things) in later eras, but those layers are involuted with the *gekokujō* Benkei layer, which is never *over*written or erased and still contributes to the literary possibilities of Benkei.

Benkei in the Early Edo Period—The Transgressive Clown Layer

After a century or so of warfare and upheaval, the Muromachi period ended and gave way to the new political order of the Tokugawa shoguns with their capital in Edo. The culture of the Edo period (1600-1868), while

not, of course, entirely discontinuous with the past, nevertheless broke with the past in many ways, and new tastes and forms became prominent. A new layer was written onto the Benkei palimpsest as he was reimagined according to these new tastes and priorities.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon 近松門左衛門 (1653–1725), the renowned author of early-Edo puppet plays (*ningyō jōruri* 人形浄瑠璃), participates in this reimagining of Benkei in his *Harami Tokiwa* 孕常盤 (Pregnant Tokiwa, 1710). This play is noted for the comedic effect of having the burly Benkei serve as a midwife. In a characteristic *jōruri* contortion of circumstance that maximizes the conflict between *ninjō* 人情 and *giri* 義理 (human emotion and duty), Yoshitsune's mother Tokiwa Gozen 常盤御前 (1138–?) has been taken in by Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 (1118–1181), her late husband's enemy and the leader of the Heike clan. She has become pregnant with his child, but tries to kill herself rather than give birth to an enemy of the Genji. When Kiyomori discovers this he has her tied to a horse and paraded around the capital as a criminal. Yoshitsune manages to secretly get himself selected as one of her horse handlers, but is powerless to help her. In the midst of this display, Tokiwa goes into labor in the middle of the street. In response to calls for a midwife:

> At that moment a tall, dark old lady appeared. Eyes like saucers peered out from the large cotton hat on her forehead. "I am well known in this flower of a capital. I'm called the Iron Granny, a famous midwife. When it comes to birth, I can handle twins or triplets without even breaking a sweat. Breach births, babies with cauls, babies missing limbs, or even gourd-shaped babies that have enlarged heads and rears and get stuck in the middle, I can drag them all out. That's why I'm also called the Rake Granny. I've come in response to your request." She sat with a shout, like a mortar being set down. Will the warriors notice she is Benkei?... He reached inside the curtain [hiding Tokiwa], yanked out the babe and held it up.[50]

Here the incongruity between the image of a frail old woman and the huge, uncouth Benkei is exploited for comic effect. Benkei also hilariously performs a kind of *nanori* 名乗り (naming oneself), declaring the fictitious midwife's fame, abilities, achievements and alternate names. *Nanori* was a custom of warriors meeting on the battlefield, who would declare their name, rank, and exploits in search of a worthy opponent. Such a *nanori* would be expected of the warrior Benkei but is farcically out of place for

the old midwife he is pretending to be. Benkei is the most unsuitable character imaginable for this ruse, and Chikamatsu exploits that buffoonery for maximum comic effect. Of course, there is an element of gender play at work here as well, but for the contemporaneous viewer this play would evoke the *onnagata* 女形*,* male actors who performed female roles and famously performed femininity even better than women. It is against such competent male performances of femininity that Benkei's wholly incompetent performance is deployed for comedic effect.

Here we can see a dramatic transformation in Benkei's characterization. Far from the imposing class transgressor of the *Gikeiki* and nō plays, Benkei has become a clown and buffoon. He is now a sideshow to be exploited for maximum comic effect, rather than the central character who stole the show from his own master. This profound change was not wholly the invention of the Edo period; Strippoli examines a sixteenth-century variant of *Benkei monogatari* and finds the same sort of comic and farcical Benkei already formed, in contrast to the more serious portrayals of Benkei and Yoshitsune in the *Gikeiki* and medieval nō plays.[51] She posits this as the precursor to the many comic portrayals of Benkei in Edo literature and culture.[52] Indeed, by the early Edo period, as seen in the above excerpt from *Harami Tokiwa,* this comic Benkei had emerged as a principal trait of the evolving character, reflecting the changing tastes and preferences of the early Edo period. By the time the play was first staged in 1710 urbanization had increased dramatically, and the urban pleasure quarters—circumscribed areas where the Shogun and feudal lords allowed prostitution and in which a kind of permanent party atmosphere prevailed—had become a major cultural locus. The images and customs of the pleasure quarters were disseminated through woodblock-printed texts and pictures even to those who lived far away from urban centers. Fujiwara argues that in this Edo urban culture, a refined, elegant young man with high social status like Yoshitsune was reimagined as his closest contemporary urban type: the debonair playboy of the pleasure quarters who pursued breathtaking romances with high-ranking courtesans. If Yoshitsune was understood with this metaphor, his ever-present hanger-on Benkei was most logically understood as a *hōkan* 幇間 or *taikomochi* 太鼓持ち.[53] These were entertainers who accompanied partygoers in the pleasure quarters, telling jokes and generally keeping the party lively. In many early Edo works, therefore, Benkei is transformed from an imposing figure who breaks class boundaries into a sycophantic jester who serves as a foil to Yoshitsune's sober romanticism. "Clown

Benkei," therefore, is the next layer that gets written onto the Benkei palimpsest in the early Edo period.

However, despite Chikamatsu's fame, *Harami Tokiwa* is not one of his more well-known or successful plays. It is more instructive to examine the phenomenally popular *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* 義経千本桜 (Yoshitsune and the thousand cherry trees, Takeda Izumo II 竹田出雲, Miyoshi Shōraku 三好松洛, and Namiki Senryū 並木千柳). Premiered at the Takemoto-za theater in Osaka in 1747, *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* is one of three plays that make up the pinnacle of the puppet theater's golden age, and one of the most popular puppet plays of all time (it was also adapted into a popular kabuki play).[54] In it, Benkei is transformed into a comic character and some of his most transgressive characteristics become objects of ridicule. However, the "transgressive Benkei" layer of the palimpsest has not been overwritten and is still apparent underneath the new layer. Benkei in this new incarnation becomes a clown who retains the ability to transgress class boundaries, and this combination of clownishness and transgression transforms him into a Bakhtinian transgressive buffoon (discussed below), a clown who can violate and question social order.

The play contains no small amount of poking fun at Benkei. In the first act, Yoshitsune's other retainers joke casually about Benkei's faults:

> SURUGA: To begin with, those seven tools he has are a big nuisance. It's really shameful to us to hear people saying that the Genji have with them a priest who's a carpenter. You should tell him firmly to stop carrying those things around...
>
> KAMEI: No, those seven tools would still be useful in constructing a building. The troublesome item is that huge lance of his. The handle is four feet long and the blade is four feet more. When he starts swinging all eight feet of that around, people find it really dangerous to be near him. He's just no use to us in an age of peace. He ought to be locked up for the time being.[55]

Benkei's tools, earlier a symbol of the *gei* of a self-made man, now are a target of mockery. In fact, his blurring of the boundaries of social roles, probably part of his appeal to Muromachi audiences, is now a source of shame ("a priest who's a carpenter"). Clearly Suruga and Kamei here are having fun at Benkei's expense, although there is a touch of irony here, since viewers know that at this point Yoshitsune is about to become estranged from Yoritomo and Benkei's skills, martial and otherwise, will become very useful even in an "age of peace."

Far from the imposing warrior who took command of Yoshitsune and his retainers, Benkei goes in tears to Shizuka, Yoshitsune's mistress, to ask her to intervene with Yoshitsune on his behalf. Shizuka remarks: "He came to me in private and simply wept like a baby, asking me to do something for him. He has taken it all so seriously, and he's so... so sensitive, it was just too pitiful to watch him. He asked me to use my influence to restore him in our Lord Yoshitsune's good graces."[56] Later Yoshitsune's wife "speaks to him as one would to a child. Benkei can only wring his hands and abjectly apologize."[57] Again, the incongruity of the stout, hardened warrior Benkei crying like a baby is exploited for comic effect, and Benkei is portrayed as a blubberer and even somewhat of a sycophant rather than a brave warrior. The fourth act contains another comic swipe at Benkei; when the monks of Mount Yoshino are discussing whether or not to harbor the fugitive Yoshitsune, one of them remarks that hiding Yoshitsune himself would not present such a problem, but that feeding the big, burly Benkei might be beyond their resources.[58] Benkei's size and strength, also sources of transgressive potential, now become a target of mockery.

In addition to these uses of Benkei for comic effect, generally *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* gives Yoshitsune a much more active role than the narratives of the Muromachi period, reducing the opportunities for Benkei to display his leadership and abilities. Significantly, the play includes a version of the *Funa Benkei* scene, but because the whole conceit of the play is that several Heike generals are still alive and living incognito, Tomomori attacks Yoshitsune's ship as a flesh-and-blood human rather than a ghost, so there is no opportunity for Benkei to show off his religious *gei*. Indeed, Benkei is not even aboard the ship when the battle occurs.[59]

Therefore, we can see that in *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* Benkei has been transformed into a jester, the perfect foil to set off the romantic hero's refinement, leadership, and ability. Nevertheless, many crucial aspects of the "*gekokujō* Benkei" or "transgressive Benkei" available in the Benkei palimpsest remain, involuted with "clown Benkei," particularly his ability to violate class boundaries. In the opening scene of the play, Yoshitsune and Benkei are in attendance at the imperial court when the Minister of the Left, Fujiwara no Tomokata 藤原朝方 (1135–1201), tries to entrap Yoshitsune by implying that the emperor wishes him to attack Yoritomo. Despite understanding what is going on, Yoshitsune must nonetheless display due deference to the court and the minister. Benkei, however, has no such restraint and can call out the scheming minister:

> BENKEI: Look here, Lord General of the Left, or whoever you are, a ruler is the mirror of his country. If he's made to say things that are unjust, then all within his realm will do the same. Understand? If there's injustice, why, as one of the nobles of the court, don't you advise the Emperor of this injustice? You think you can overcome with words a general who wouldn't flinch before a menacing army. I've had enough! Now, take back what you said. Apologize![60]

Denouncing a high minister and demanding an apology from him is far above Benkei's station, and Yoshitsune must immediately chastise him, but nonetheless the play is able to depict Benkei getting away with it because such class transgression is a fundamental aspect of the Benkei character, attested deep in the Benkei palimpsest despite his more recent transformation into comic relief.

Although *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* portrays Benkei as a crybaby off the battlefield, during battle scenes Benkei's characterization as a rowdy warrior who taunts, mocks, and slaughters samurai remains intact. When Yoritomo's forces attack Yoshitsune, Benkei is in fine form as he kills "several hundred underlings" and then proceeds to ruthlessly mock the samurai Tosabō before killing him.[61] Although the play does not elevate Benkei over Yoshitsune like the *Gikeiki* and nō plays, it does elevate him over other samurai as he belittles and kills them despite his low status. Edo period drama is full of such belittling of samurai, but it usually occurs in the context of *yatsushi* 窶し, or a socially high character disguised as a socially humble character. The well-known kabuki play *Sukeroku* 助六 (Tsuuchi Jihei 津打治兵衛 II and Tsuuchi Hanemon 津打半右衛, 1713), for example, features the eponymous main character, apparently a commoner, mocking and denigrating various samurai. However, it is later revealed that Sukeroku is not a commoner but in fact the famous samurai Soga Gorō 曽我五郎 (1174–1193) in disguise, so no social barriers have been violated after all.[62] *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* itself also has a scene in which Ginpei, a commoner, makes an impassioned case for the sanctity of commoners' homes before beating and chasing out Sagami, a samurai who has barged into his house, another apparent case of class transgression. However, it is later revealed that Ginpei is in fact the Heike general Tomomori and that, furthermore, Sagami is his subordinate.[63] Again, it turns out that no class boundaries have been transgressed, and the moment of apparent transgression was merely a fleeting illusion. In the Tokugawa

order samurai monopolized political power and had many privileges, and the boundaries between castes (or at least between commoners and samurai) were much more vigorously policed than in previous eras. Such moments of apparent violation of caste boundaries, of commoners giving samurai their comeuppance, were probably delicious moments of transgression to commoner audiences. Naturally, those moments had to be later revealed as not transgressive after all in order to ameliorate any challenge to the existing social order and avoid running afoul of shogunal censors.

However, Benkei is not of the samurai caste but an outcast monk of the lowest rank, as caste-conscious Edo audiences were no doubt aware. He belittles and kills samurai, yet he is not a *yatsushi* character: not a samurai in disguise. Therefore, when Benkei mocks samurai it is true class transgression, not apparent transgression that is later brought back into line with hegemonic social ideology as in the case of *Sukeroku*. Perhaps these actions slipped past shogunal censors because they are a part of the Benkei palimpsest that was firmly established centuries before the Edo period began.[64]

Yoshitsune senbon zakura employs this element of Benkei's character in order to pillory samurai even as it transforms Benkei into a clown, effectively superimposing the "transgressive Benkei" and "clown Benkei" layers of the palimpsest. This sort of comic character that can overturn sociopolitical hierarchies is described by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival, those spaces in medieval European society where laughter at the sociopolitical order was permitted, enabling "the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (à l'envers), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings."[65] In the space afforded by carnival and the unseriousness of laughter, the "people's unofficial truth" could emerge. Bakhtin writes:

> The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation.... Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority.… It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself.[66]

Laughter, comedy, and by extension comic buffoons like Benkei have the power to reverse and overturn—even if only in a circumscribed space—the logic of official, authoritarian order. Therefore:

> Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.… This is why it not only permitted the expression of an antifeudal, popular truth; it helped to uncover this truth and to give it an internal form.[67]

Yoshitsune senbon zakura, therefore, in transforming Benkei from the serious *gekokujō* character of medieval nō plays into an object of laughter and ridicule does not remove his transgressive potential but rather transforms it. He becomes a clown, a carnivalesque buffoon. Precisely because audiences laugh *at* him, they are allowed to laugh *with* him as he taunts, belittles, and pokes fun at samurai. This Bakhtinian buffoon is present in some of the more humorous medieval Benkei texts, such as the one Strippoli examines, mentioned above. But the Benkei of the most prominent medieval texts, such as the *Gikeiki* and nō plays, displays a more sober class transgression. The Bakhtinian buffoon, therefore, becomes an important part of Benkei's characterization in the early Edo period, when it is added to the Benkei palimpsest. It is written over the earlier Muromachi characterization, layered over it in the manner of a palimpsest so that the Muromachi characterizations are still visible. "*Gekokujō* Benkei" and "clown Benkei," class transgression and buffoonery, become involuted in the palimpsest.

Benkei in the Late Edo Period—The "Defiant Hero" Layer

By the late Edo period tastes and priorities shifted once again, and the characterization of Benkei shifted with them, adding yet another layer onto the palimpsest of Benkei characterization. The most significant Benkei play from the late Edo period is undoubtedly *Kanjinchō* 勧進帳 (The subscription list, Namiki Gohei 並木五瓶 III). Considered one of the *kabuki jūhachiban* 歌舞伎十八番 (eighteen best kabuki plays), the most canonical version was first performed in 1840 to wide popularity and remains one of the favorite plays in the kabuki repertoire to the present day.[68] *Kanjinchō* is an adaptation of the nō play *Ataka*, and features most of the same components discussed above with the addition of a few new dramatic elements to appeal to Edo audiences. Yoshitsune and his party attempt to cross the road barrier at Ataka disguised as monks traveling to

solicit funds for the reconstruction of Tōdaiji temple. To allay the suspicions of the barrier guards, Benkei makes up the complicated Buddhist language of a subscription scroll on the spot as he "reads" a blank scroll aloud. Then he beats Yoshitsune when the guards notice him and they are finally let through. Afterwards, he apologizes to Yoshitsune and is forgiven. To this plot inherited from the nō play, *Kanjinchō* adds several other elements. For one, in *Kanjinchō* the captain of the barrier guards, Togashi, sees through Benkei's ruse but is so moved by Benkei's loyalty to Yoshitsune and his fervent efforts to serve his master that he forgets his duty and lets the party through anyway. Again, such conflict between *ninjō* (emotion) and *giri* (duty) was a staple of Edo theatre.

However, *Kanjinchō*'s most important innovation is the transformation of Benkei into an *aragoto* character. *Aragoto* 荒事, or "rough style," was a style of acting that became phenomenally popular with audiences in the city of Edo in the latter half of the Edo period. Characters played in this style were often streaked with red paint to accentuate their fierceness or musculature, performed bold *mie* 見栄 (kabuki's "dramatic poses"), stomped vigorously across stage pronouncing their lines with loud bombast, and performed feats of superhuman strength and skill. Furthermore, Andrew Gerstle argues that *aragoto* had an inextricable political dimension, that "the essence of *aragoto* is defiance toward the samurai."[69] *Aragoto* characters often belittled, challenged, and slaughtered samurai on stage, as off the stage mismanagement of the economy and natural disasters, socioeconomic contradictions, and samurai perfidy invited increasing resentment of samurai rule in the late Edo period.

Kanjinchō transforms Benkei into just one such *aragoto* defier of samurai. The role is a hallmark of the Ichikawa Danjūrō 市川團十郎 acting lineage, famous for their *aragoto* portrayals.[70] Although more subdued than some other *aragoto* characters, such as the street tough Sukeroku or *Shibaraku's* Kagemasa with his red-striped makeup and architectural costume, Benkei is played with a commanding presence. He strikes several *mie* and rushes vigorously around the stage variously arguing with Togashi, physically holding back Yoshitsune's other retainers, leading Buddhist prayers, and drinking a huge cup of sake. His costume, makeup, and movements are far more imposing than those of Yoshitsune, Togashi, or the other samurai. Although Benkei had been transformed into a clown in the early Edo period, the "transgressive Benkei" layer created in the Muromachi period had never been overwritten and still existed in the

Benkei palimpsest. For late Edo playwrights and audiences, this layer could be mined and transformed to fit a new taste for transgressive *aragoto* superheroes.

Helen Parker argues that *Kanjinchō* and other kabuki plays about Yoshitsune's downfall were popular because they "centre on Yoshitsune's vulnerability and dependency on others after his alienation from Yoritomo... This allows for certain characters of dramatic potential from his immediate circle to be drawn out, and to move from the position of existing to support Yoshitsune towards more active participation in the plot."[71] In *Kanjinchō* it is certainly Benkei who takes this active role. Not only is Yoshitsune relegated to a passive and dependent role, as Parker says, but the other characters are also dependent on Benkei, who is played with *aragoto* vigor and confidence. Unlike the comic buffoon of *Yoshitsune senbon zakura,* the Benkei of *Kanjinchō* is a strong masculine leader, commanding and overshadowing the other characters. Of course, Edo audiences could not help but be aware of the class differences—and therefore the class commentary—in the play. The commoner monk Benkei comes to the fore with the most impressive, forceful performance, while the samurai are relegated to passive and dependent status. Furthermore, it is Benkei's loyalty to Yoshitsune that impresses Togashi and ultimately allows Yoshitsune's party to pass through the road barrier. Loyalty to one's master was one of the principle samurai virtues, and so in its valorization of this virtue *Kanjinchō* does reaffirm samurai moral ideology. However, it is the commoner Benkei who exemplifies this virtue: a commoner better at samurai morality that samurai themselves. *Kanjinchō* mines the Benkei palimpsest for elements useful to its critique of samurai (such as his ability to rise above his caste and his loyalty) and discards those that are not (such as his comic buffoonery) and fashions a new "*aragoto* Benkei" representation of Benkei suitable for the late Edo period that gets added to the Benkei palimpsest.

Another significant Benkei play is *Gohiiki kanjinchō* 御贔屓勧進帳 (Your favorite subscription list, Sakurada Jisuke 桜田治助 I, 1773). Written earlier than *Kanjinchō* it has not enjoyed as much popularity, although it is still performed today. It is a version of *Kanjinchō* with the same basic plot, but its portrayal of Benkei is less restrained than the portrayal that appears in *Kanjinchō,* and in it he is a full-blown bombastic *aragoto* superhero. As Leonard Pronko writes, he is "a magnificent example of the flamboyantly masculine (*aragoto*) acting style for which the Ichikawa Danjūrō family is famous."[72] In this play Benkei strikes

many more powerful *mie* and performs superhuman feats. For example, when some barrier guards try to get a look at his blank subscription scroll, Benkei stomps the ground with such tremendous force that the guards fall over. Togashi lets the party pass on the condition that Benkei surrender himself and allow himself to be tied down by ropes, but Benkei easily breaks the ropes with superhuman strength. He then fights and kills the guards single-handedly before pulling off their heads with his bare hands, throwing them in a big tub of water, and insultingly stirring them as if they are potatoes (consequently, an alternate name for this play is *Imo arai kanjinchō* 芋洗い勧進帳, or "Potato-washing subscription list").[73] In this we can see the "clown Benkei" characterization of early Edo also being extracted from the Benkei palimpsest and transformed, but far from comic buffoonery this fierce Benkei performs a kind of macabre clowning with the heads of his enemies. In this play Benkei's bold *aragoto* defiance of samurai is much more straightforward as he intimidates, defeats, kills, and desecrates the corpses of the samurai political masters. In an era where resentment of the sociopolitical order was mounting, Benkei is transformed into one of the "brash outlaw-heroes who stand in defiance of the samurai class," as Gerstle writes.[74] Benkei was once again rewritten to respond to the tastes and cultural projects of a new era, adding a new layer to the Benkei palimpsest, the late-Edo "*aragoto* Benkei" or "authority-defying hero" layer.

Modern Benkei—The Involution of the "Loyal Benkei" Layer

The advent of modernity in Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 dramatically transformed cultural tastes and priorities once again, as Japan opened to the West and radical social, political, technological, and economic changes were introduced rapidly. New modern tastes and cultural projects transformed Benkei once again, adding yet another layer to the Benkei palimpsest. These transformations occurred in both text and performance. For example, Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838–1903) began to perform Benkei in *Kanjinchō* without striking any *mie* at all, a dramatic interpretation that significantly reduces the drama and power of Benkei's performance. Ichikawa Danjūrō IX, it turns out, was an eager participant in the *katsurekigeki* 活歴劇 (living history theatre) movement.[75] This movement, mostly championed by playwrights and intellectuals, responded to Western ideas about historical representation and held that history plays should strive for historical accuracy (which had never been a particular concern before), becoming representations of Japanese history as well as Japanese culture. It was also concerned that plays should have

didactic purpose, teaching morals appropriate for the new Meiji era.[76] Kabuki and *ningyō jōruri* were turned on their heads. From forms that rummaged playfully through history in order to challenge or appropriate official morality, they were transformed into forms that accurately represented history and supported official morality. As Helen Parker writes, these "traditional genres were being brought into line with their Western counterparts in that they were raised to the status of high culture. Eventually, *kabuki* was considered fitting entertainment for the emperor as opera was fit for kings and queens in European countries."[77] Consequently, the exaggerated portrayals of Benkei in Edo period theater—both the comic buffoon and the bombastic hero—were not suitable for Meiji artistic currents. Ichikawa Danjūrō IX, therefore, played Benkei much more conservatively, making him if not exactly more historically accurate, at least less flamboyantly ahistorical, transforming Benkei again to suit the projects of the new sociopolitical order.

Similarly, in 1885 Kawatake Mokuami 河竹黙阿弥 (1816-1893) wrote a kabuki adaptation of *Funa Benkei* which largely ignores the kabuki tradition surrounding that plot—as established in *Yoshitsune senbon zakura,* for example—and directly adapts the nō play *Funa Benkei,* because the nō play was considered to be based on historically accurate source material.[78] In this version Benkei once again uses his religious powers to battle Heike ghosts, personified in Tomomori. Benkei, therefore, becomes a serious religious figure, neither buffoon nor superhero, who saves Yoshitsune with his prayer beads and Buddhist devotion.[79] Of course, these layers of the Benkei character had never been erased or overwritten from the Benkei palimpsest by later additions and interpretations, and Mokuami was able to mine these earlier layers of Benkei characterization to suit the contemporary taste for more sober representation of religion and culture, and write his interpretation onto the palimpsest in turn.

With the class transgression and flamboyant defiance of authority that had been crucial aspects of Benkei's character diminished in this modern interpretation, another quality of Benkei available in the palimpsest, his loyalty to Yoshitsune, became more prominent. This in turn led to the most infamous layer in the multilayered, historically shifting characterization of Benkei. During the Second World War, the Japanese government tried to mobilize all aspects of cultural production behind the war effort. In addition to a censorship program of sweeping breadth, authors and theaters were encouraged to produce material that promoted loyalty and sacrifice.

Kanjinchō was one of the central pieces of kabuki's contribution to the war effort because of the loyalty that Benkei displays to Yoshitsune, his superior. Censors noted that Benkei displays "perfect feudal loyalty," and this sort of loyalty is exactly what the government wanted to instill in citizens and soldiers.[80] A core of patriotic plays including *Kanjinchō* were performed more than a thousand times between 1931 and 1945 as kabuki responded to the demands of the government and patriotic culture.[81]

One of renowned director Kurosawa Akira's 黒澤明 (1910–1998) early films is *Tora no o o fumu otokotachi* 虎の尾を踏む男達 (English title: *Those who Tread on the Tiger's Tail,* 1945), a fairly faithful film reproduction of the kabuki *Kanjinchō* with the exception of a new comic character, a porter, who is added to aid plot exposition. Following the *katsurekigeki* acting tradition (and cinematic convention), the film attempts to present a more historically realistic version of the *Kanjinchō* story. It removes the narrative from the kabuki stage and uses realistic settings and costumes, and of course none of the *mie* that emphasize Benkei's strength are struck. Production began in 1945 in the last months of the war, when government censorship was at its peak. Censors approved the film for production, presumably because it showcased Benkei's loyalty and would (they hoped) therefore inspire loyalty in viewers.[82] Production finished during the American occupation, but the movie was probably banned by the occupation government's Civil Censorship Division for displaying values of "feudalistic" loyalty and the film was ordered destroyed.[83] This state-sponsored (or state-enforced) interpretation of Benkei as a paragon of loyalty, portrayed in theater, film, and other mediums during the war years was added to the palimpsest, becoming the most prominent and visible layer in the Benkei palimpsest as it is perceived today. With this ignominious "loyal Benkei" layer of characterization looming large in the composite image of the Benkei palimpsest, loyalty is probably seen as his central characteristic now, even though we can detect previous layers and previous moments of Benkei textual creation in that image. Ironically, given his earlier function as a class transgressor, Benkei is best known today for his loyalty to his feudal superior.

Postwar Benkei—The "Simpleton Benkei" Layer of the Palimpsest

In the postwar, in the wake of US occupation, democratization, and postwar economic recovery, tastes changed dramatically once again, and

a new layer was added to the Benkei palimpsest to accommodate them. *Hi no Tori* 火の鳥 (Phoenix) is the "life work" and magnum opus of Tezuka Osamu 手塚治虫 (1928-1989), the celebrated "*manga no kamisama"* 漫画の神様 (god of manga). Tezuka was born in 1928, grew up during the war, and after the war became a committed pacifist and humanist. *Hi no tori,* published sporadically from 1968 until 1988, just before his death, contains a fantastical history of Japan that does not attempt to accurately represent the past, but rather to confront and reject the version of history promoted by the wartime state—the history that Tezuka was taught in school during the war. Consequently, far from a history of heroic deeds by wise rulers and loyal retainers, in *Hi no tori,* as Rachael Hutchinson has remarked:

> The nation of Japan is ruled by merciless emperors and shoguns in a repeating cycle of oppression, persecution and destruction. Tezuka invokes imperial discourse and emotionally charged national symbols to create a history that is both intelligent in its critique and stirring in its rhetoric, leaving the reader questioning not only the history being represented but their own attitudes towards it.[84]

Despite the ambitious scope of the work, two volumes of the compiled edition, roughly one sixth of the whole work, center on Benkei (with long interludes that depict related characters, especially Taira no Kiyomori). Probably because Benkei had been such a strong symbol of wartime loyalty, *Hi no tori* spends a considerable amount of time dismantling the image of Benkei as the ideal loyal retainer.

Far from a clever, literate monk of prodigious strength, *Hi no tori* depicts Benkei as a simpleton. In fact, in the text Benkei's name is changed to Benta. Benkei 弁慶 is a priestly name with an appropriately Buddhist flavor, meaning something like "preaching jubilation." In *Hi no tori,* Benta 弁太 is a simple, illiterate woodcutter. The *ta* in his names comes from the "logs," *maruta* 丸太, he cuts.[85] Far from the idealized monk Benkei with his Buddhist education, Benta is only able to preach about logs. This is characteristic of the text's representation of Benkei (Benta), dismantling the image of Benkei as a loyal retainer who willingly exhausts his talents to serve power, and transforming him into a simpleton who is at every turn cynically deceived by power (in the form of Yoshitsune) and tricked into serving power's goals. In this way, *Hi no tori* participates in the backlash against wartime state ideology that swept through culture in the postwar.

Benkei is transformed once again to respond to this new cultural concern, both mining and adding another layer to the Benkei palimpsest. Tezuka draws on the "clown Benkei" layer of Benkei characterization, as Benta retains some aspects of the huge and burly buffoon. But unlike the Benkei of *Yoshitsune senbon zakura*, Benta is illiterate, unintelligent, naïve, and becomes a mere pawn swept along by currents of history, too unsophisticated to realize power is manipulating him until the very end.

Benta's initial goal is to rescue his fiancé from the Heike samurai who kidnapped her and took her to their Rokuhara headquarters, the same samurai who killed his parents and burned down his house. Yoshitsune uses this desire to manipulate Benta into serving his own interests. Perceiving that Benta will be useful to his ambitions to overthrow the Heike, he gets Benta to swear fealty to him only by promising to rescue his fiancé.[86] Later, Yoshitsune needs to leave Kyoto for a while, and to convince Benta to give up on rescuing his lover trapped in an aristocratic mansion there he deceives him with a fake letter from her asking him to leave the capital, cynically using Benta's love in order to make his vassal pliant to his needs. The illiterate Benta is completely fooled by the counterfeit letter read out loud to him, a stunning reversal of the *Kanjinchō* scroll-reading element.[87] In Hiraizumi, where Yoshitsune gathers his forces, he proposes to make Benta a samurai so he can use him as an officer in his newly-formed army. Benta is vehemently opposed, as it is samurai that killed his family and kidnapped his fiancé. But once again, Yoshitsune uses Benta's love to manipulate him, encouraging him to become a samurai "for [her] sake."[88] Benta is manipulated by power into becoming the thing he hates the most—a samurai wielder of violence. Benta (and Benkei's) service to Yoshitsune is therefore shown not to spring from some internal moral quality of loyalty, but rather from the cynical manipulations of power. The implication, of course, is that the same was true of all wartime loyalty.

The depiction of Benta in *Hi no tori* also undermines the heroism of Benkei that militarists applauded. *Hi no tori* contains versions of many of Benkei's famous exploits, but depicts them as commonplace and unheroic. For example, Benta's prodigious strength does allow him to defeat some samurai on Gojō bridge, but most of the samurai officials are cowards and merely throw their swords at Benta and run away.[89] The fight between Yoshitsune and Benkei is not an epic battle between two legendary warriors, but rather a scrap between two beggars in dirty rags fighting with sticks, which ends when Benta's flatulence becomes unbearable.[90]

Hi no tori also features a version of the "great torch" scene mentioned above. In one of Benkei's very rare appearances in the *Genpei jōsuiki,* Yoshitsune summons Benkei when preparing to cross a mountain at night:

> The general, of course, had never been to this mountain before, so he called "Musashibō, Musashibō." Benkei came forward. "Prepare the great torch," he said. The soldiers had no idea what he meant, but Benkei just said "I will prepare it." He took a large force forward and set fire to the houses along the road one after another. The flames blazed to the heavens and lit the earth, and they were easily able to make the three *ri* mountain crossing by this light.[91]

This short appearance is significant because it illustrates the special understanding and trust between Yoshitsune and Benkei that would come to be fleshed out in later stories. *Hi no tori*'s Benta, however, does not share such a special understanding with Yoshitsune and is in fact vehemently opposed:

> YOSHITSUNE: Set fire to those civilian houses over there. If you burn seven or eight it'll be as bright as day.
>
> BENTA: Please don't do that, general!... Burning the houses of innocent bystanders is just too cruel! My house was burned by samurai. I know what it's like to be made homeless by fire.
>
> YOSHITSUNE: If the people living there make a fuss kill them all. They'll just get in the way of the battle.
>
> BENTA: That's just too coldhearted!
>
> YOSHITSUNE: Shut up. Stop complaining about every little strategy. Alright Benta, I order you: set fire to these houses…. If you continue to disobey me I'll have you court-martialed.[92]

At this point Benta already believes his fiancé is dead so Yoshitsune must threaten him with a court-martial rather than motivate him with the promise of being reunited with his love. The result is much the same, however. The special understanding between Benkei and Yoshitsune evident in the *Genpei jōsuiki* is conspicuously absent in *Hi no tori,* as is Benkei's loyalty to the latter. Yoshitsune uses threats (because he has never commanded Benta's loyalty) to turn Benta into a burner of civilian houses, the very violation that power inflicted upon Benta at the beginning of his tragic story.

Finally, Yoritomo's forces corner Yoshitsune in Hiraizumi. Yoshitsune tries to compel Benta to fight and die with him, but Benta,

finally wise to Yoshitsune's cold manipulations, declines. In a dramatic reversal from Benkei, who gladly surrendered his own life to give his master a few more minutes, Benta either kills his master or lets him die, depending on the version of the text.[93] At the end, *Hi no tori* finally mines the "transgressive Benkei" layer of the Benkei palimpsest here to show Benta killing his own master. There is a version of the famous *Benkei tachi ōjō* 弁慶立ち往生 (Benkei's standing death) here; in the *Gikeiki,* Benkei remains standing after death, feathered by dozens of arrows, to frighten his enemies and give Yoshitsune a few more moments to commit suicide with proper ceremony, serving his master even in death. In *Hi no tori,* Benta similarly stands defiantly against Yoritomo's forces with many arrows sticking out of him, but this time it is to protect his wife. *Hi no tori* appropriates the *Benkei tachi ōjō* imagery but transforms it; Benta's one true act of heroism is not an act of loyalty in service to a feudal master, but instead an act of love in service of humanistic values.

Hi no tori, therefore, transforms a symbol of wartime loyalty into a critique of that very value. Benkei's acts of loyalty, celebrated by the wartime ideological regime, are shown to merely be the credulous acceptance of power by a simpleton too unsophisticated to understand how he is being manipulated until the very end. The implication, by extension, is that only the credulous and simple could exhibit such "loyalty," and therefore the wartime loyalty that Benkei was supposed to represent was merely an ideological cover for the cynical manipulations of state power. *Hi no tori* adds this "simpleton Benkei" that critiques loyalty to the palimpsest of Benkei characterization. This characterization is appropriate to the projects of the postwar, but has certainly not overwritten the previous layers.

As we have seen, Benkei is not a stable figure in the history of Japanese literature, but a palimpsest of images and characterizations that has been written and rewritten repeatedly. Since his appearance in the fourteenth century, Benkei has been a useful figure for the cultural, political, and ideological projects of various eras, connected as he is with a major historical figure but without any history of his own that might constrain creativity. The image of Benkei available today may seem to be a unitary construction, but as this investigation has shown "Benkei" is a multi-laminated composite consisting of (at a minimum) "transgressive Benkei," "clown Benkei," "authority-defying hero Benkei," "loyal Benkei," and "simpleton Benkei." Benkei has served as a representative figure of *gekokujō* culture in the medieval period, a transgressive comic

buffoon in the early Edo period, a defier of samurai hegemony in the late Edo period, the epitome of loyalty in the wartime period, and finally as an admonition against wartime loyalty in the postwar period.

Benkei's image has been historically unstable, his characterization changing to reflect shifting sociocultural currents and political projects. Each new characterization mined the existing Benkei palimpsest for literary possibilities useful to current projects (his unusual strength mined for oversized clownishness, his service to his master mined to highlight his loyalty, etc.). Each new characterization was written on the Benkei palimpsest to be mined in turn (his clownishness mined for transgressive buffoonery, loyalty mined for an admonition against wartime values, etc.). These layers did not overwrite previous layers, but became involuted with them. Benkei stories are not monologic but palimpsestuous. New texts may change Benkei's characterization but are still shot through with the characterizations of earlier texts: even Kurosawa's wartime propaganda promoting loyalty still features Benkei beating his master in *gekokujō* fashion, and even Tezuka's cautionary tale about wartime loyalty retains Benkei's ability to transgress classes. Benkei is not a unified character, but rather a palimpsest of different iterations of Benkei created at different moments for divergent purposes, now all inextricably tangled together, leaving Benkei a literary figure with rich (if contradictory) depths.

Hi no tori is hardly the final word on Benkei; he continues to appear in cultural products and to be adapted into new mediums, and for new projects and cultural currents. To give just one recent example, Benkei appears in the popular video game *Zenobureido 2* ゼノブレイド 2 (English title: *Xenoblade Chronicles 2,* 2017). In the grammar of anime, manga, and video game subculture, a strong character who protects a more delicate, refined companion fits into the mold of an "older sister" character, and indeed Benkei appears in the game as a woman protecting a sensitive, bespectacled Yoshitsune—also satisfying a subcultural interest in gender-swapped characters. He has been rewritten again according to the cultural tastes and vocabularies of yet another era. This is just the latest layer, still in the process of being added to the Benkei palimpsest, and surely not the last.

NOTES

[1] Who now remembers Ernest Maltravers, from the eponymous 1837 novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton? Yet Daniel Poch argues that this novel in translation

was crucial in constructing the emotional expressiveness of the modern Japanese novel. McTeague, from the popular 1899 Frank Norris novel *McTeague,* is hardly a household name now. Takahashi Oden, the darkly compelling murderer protagonist of Kanagaki Robun's bestselling *Takahashi Oden yasha monogatari* (1879) is all but forgotten now. And so on and so forth. Daniel Poch, *Licentious Fictions: Ninjō and the Nineteenth-Century Japanese Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[2] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage: The Open University, 1997), 1–12.

[3] Michael Emmerich has argued that even the monumental *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (The Tale of Genji) remained a canonical classic precisely because it was replaced with its own rewritings and adaptations. Michael Emmerich, "The Splendor of Hybridity: Image and Text in Ryūtei Tanehiko's Inaka Genji," in *Envisioning the Tale of Genji: Media, Gender, and Cultural Production*, ed. Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 211–42.

[4] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

[5] Ibid., 398–9.

[6] Sarah Dillon, "Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies," *Textual Practice* 19.3 (January 1, 2005): 245.

[7] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), 8.

[8] It contained, for example, time travel, in addition to other innovations.

[9] Ibid., 6.

[10] Ibid., 21.

[11] Ibid., 254.

[12] Roberta Strippoli, "Warrior / Monk, Demon / Saint: Humor and Parody in the Late Medieval Tale of Benkei," *Monumenta Nipponica* 70 (January 1, 2015): 47.

[13] Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129) famously said "The waters of the Kamo River, dice, and warrior monks; these are all things that do not obey my will." "Sōhei," in *Nihon dai hyakka zensho* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1994).

[14] Shigekazu Fujiwara, *Benkei: eiyū-zukuri no shinseishi* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2002), 3–10. The few mentions of Benkei can be found at Helen McCullough, *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 301, 305, 363, 365, 373, 405, 406, and in Teiji Ichiko, ed., *Heike Monogatari (2)*, vol. 30, *Nihon koten*

bungaku zenshū (NKBZ) (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1975), 214, 220, 363, 366, 384, 458, 461.

[15] Ibid., 11–22.

[16] Although this was an era of conflict and the dates of what can properly be called the Muromachi period are contested, here I am using the official establishment of the Ashikaga shogunate in 1336 and Ashikaga Yoshiaki's defeat by Oda Nobunaga in 1573 (effectively ending the shogunate) as the years that bracket this period.

[17] Helen McCullough, *Yoshitsune: A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), 40.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 42.

[20] *Kōchū Nihon bungaku taikei*, vol. 16 (Tokyo: Kokumin tosho kabushiki gaisha, 1925), 71. All translations unless otherwise indicated are my own.

[21] Pierre-François Souyri, *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*, trans. Käthe Roth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 4.

[22] Susumu Ike, "Competence Over Loyalty, Lords and Retainers in Medieval Japan," in *War and State Building in Medieval Japan*, ed. John A. Ferejohn and Frances McCall Rosenbluth (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 62. Many narratives from the Muromachi period feature a *gekokujō* theme: people of traditionally low station rising above their supposed betters. Of course, this is not the only literary trend of the time, or even the only literary response to political instability; Buddhist themes of religious salvation were also prevalent in medieval literature, and this prevalence can be seen as at least partly driven by the reassurance such themes offered in a time of turmoil. Some Muromachi texts, however, do seem to feature and even indirectly celebrate *gekokujō.* The well-known story *Monogusa Tarō,* for example, features a beggar who goes to the capital to find wealth and an aristocratic bride. *Issun bōshi* describes a man of small stature both physically and socially who manages to acquire wealth, love, and an imperial appointment. Although these social climbers are usually reincorporated into the accepted ideology and class structure by the end of the narrative, their social ascent nonetheless seems to have presumably interested Muromachi audiences as this theme is evident in many texts and dramas from the period. See Akihiro Satake, *Gekokujo no bungaku* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1967).

[23] McCullough, *Yoshitsune,* 112.

[24] Strippoli, "Warrior / Monk, Demon / Saint," 50–53.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Mikael S. Adolphson, "The Dōshu: Clerics at Work in Early Medieval Japanese Monasteries," *Monumenta Nipponica* 67.2 (2012): 272.

[27] Ibid., 266–268.

[28] Fujiwara, *Benkei: eiyū-zukuri no shinseishi,* 86–87.

[29] Souyri, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 4–5.

[30] McCullough, *The Tale of the Heike*, 178–183.

[31] McCullough, *Yoshitsune,* 156.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Beng Choo Lim, *Another Stage: Kanze Nobumitsu and the Late Muromachi Noh Theater* (Ithaca, N. Y.: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), 53–54. In general *mugen* nō plays are the ones that have become valued in the present for their sublime tragic exploration of human emotion. Usually they involve a *waki* (supporting character) who sees a dream or vision of a ghost, and the play focuses on the ghost's regret and suffering. The most celebrated nō plays, such as *Matsukaze* 松風 and *Aoi no ue* 葵上 are *mugen* nō plays. By contrast, *furyū* nō plays focus on creating an interesting spectacle on stage (such as dancing or demon expulsion) rather than exploring human interiority, and are thus less celebrated in the present. See next note.

[34] Ibid., 166; 37–38.

[35] Royall Tyler, *Japanese Nō Dramas* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 93.

[36] Ibid., 94.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Steven T. Brown, *Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 123.

[39] Laurence Kominz, "Origins of Kabuki Acting in Medieval Japanese Drama," in *A Kabuki Reader: History and Performance*, ed. Samuel L. Leiter (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 22.

[40] Tyler, *Japanese Nō Dramas,* 85.

[41] Arthur Waley, *The Noh Plays of Japan* (Tuttle, 2010), 52–57.

[42] McCullough, *Yoshitsune*, 41.

[43] Naoko Hagi, "Benkei setsuwa: deai no mamen ni tsuite," *Kōnan joshi daigaku daigakuin ronshū* 2 (2004): 14.

[44] McCullough, *Yoshitsune*, 42.

[45] Ibid., 262–263.

[46] Hōgan was Yoshitsune's imperial title.

[47] Kenneth Yasuda, "The Dramatic Structure of Ataka, a Noh Play," *Monumenta Nipponica* 27.4 (1972), 389.

[48] McCullough, *Yoshitsune,* 62.

[49] Fujiwara, *Benkei: eiyū-zukuri no shinseishi,* 102.

[50] Monzaemon Chikamatsu, *Chikamatsu zenshū Vol. 6* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1987), 160–161.

[51] Strippoli, "Warrior / Monk, Demon / Saint," 46–48.

[52] Ibid., 75.

[53] Fujiwara, *Benkei: eiyū-zukuri no shinseishi,* 165.

[54] Izumo Takeda, Senryū Namiki, and Shōraku Miyoshi, *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees: A Masterpiece of the Eighteenth-Century Japanese Puppet Theater*, trans. Stanleigh H. Jones (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 3.

[55] Ibid., 68.

[56] Ibid., 66–67.

[57] Ibid., 70.

[58] Ibid., 215.

[59] Benkei is still involved in the plan to foil Tomomori. Helen Parker points out that much like in the nō play, in the puppet play Tomomori's resistance is defeated by Benkei's prayer beads. In the nō version Benkei uses them to pray and drive Tomomori back, whereas in the puppet version he throws them around Tomomori's neck causing him to acknowledge defeat. See Helen Parker, *Progressive Traditions: An Illustrated Study of Plot Repetition in Traditional Japanese Theatre* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 96. However, Benkei's role is still much diminished from the central one he is assigned in the nō play.

[60] Takeda and Jones, *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, 51.

[61] Ibid., 85–57.

[62] Jihei II Tsuuchi and Hanemon Tsuuchi, "Sukeroku: Flower of Edo," in *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays*, trans. James R. Brandon (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 74.

[63] Takeda and Jones, *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, 114.

[64] For more on shogunal censorship, see Peter F. Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 324–357.

[65] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

[66] Ibid., 90–91.

[67] Ibid., 94.

[68] A. C. Scott, *Kanjincho: A Japanese Kabuki Play* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1953), 11.

[69] C. Andrew Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo: Eighteenth-Century Kabuki and Its Patrons," *Asian Theatre Journal* 4.1 (1987): 56.

[70] Parker, *Progressive Traditions*, 114.

[71] Ibid., 60.

[72] Leonard Pronko, "Great Favorite Subscription List," in *Kabuki Plays on Stage*, ed. James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, vol. 2 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 28.

[73] From a performance of Gohiiki kanjinchō at the Shinbashi Enbujō, December 22, 2012.

[74] Gerstle, "Flowers of Edo," 63.

[75] Faith Bach, "Takatoki: A Kabuki Drama," *Asian Theatre Journal* 15.2 (1998): 157.

[76] Parker, *Progressive Traditions,* 42.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 71.

[79] Ibid., 88–89.

[80] James R. Brandon, *Kabuki's Forgotten War: 1931–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 103.

[81] Ibid., 186.

[82] Later in the production process censors withdrew their approval, calling the film a corruption of *Kanjinchō*, a sacrosanct piece of traditional Japanese culture. Presumably this is because the porter, a comic character played by a popular comedian, detracted from the solemn, dignified gravity of the story. See Rachael Hutchinson, "Kurosawa Akira's One Wonderful Sunday: Censorship, Context and 'Counter-Discursive' Film," *Japan Forum* 19.3 (2007): 372.

[83] Jay Rubin, "From Wholesomeness to Decadence: The Censorship of Literature under the Allied Occupation," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 11.1 (Spring 1985): 93. Multiple sources claim the occupation government censored the film, and in fact the incident is fairly well known as an example of U. S. censorship in

Japan. However, in his autobiography Kurosawa claims that the film was not censored for content. Rather, he claims that a Japanese censor, in an act of petty personal revenge against Kurosawa, purposefully left *Tora no o* off a list of films in production that was handed over to the U. S. authorities, and it merely became an illegal film by default. See Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 143–144.

[84] Rachael Hutchinson, "Sabotaging the Rising Sun: Representing History in Tezuka Osamu's Phoenix," in *Manga and the Representation of Japanese History*, ed. Roman Rosenbaum (New York: Routledge, 2013), 18.

[85] Osamu Tezuka, *Hi no tori*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1992), 58.

[86] Ibid., 141.

[87] Ibid., 218–19.

[88] Osamu Tezuka, *Hi no tori*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1992), 13–14.

[89] Tezuka, *Hi no tori*, vol. 7, 118.

[90] Ibid., 138–140.

[91] Shigekatsu Minobe and Chizuru Sakakibara, eds., *Genpei seisuiki*, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Miyai shoten, 2001), 17.

[92] Tezuka, *Hi no tori vol. 8,* 150–51.

[93] Ibid., 263–6. Tezuka was known for revising his works between magazine and book versions, or even between different book editions. Originally Benta smashes Yoshitsune's head in with a log. Later this was changed to have Benta force Yoshitsune out into the arrows of Yoritomo's army.