

**Couple Eloping: the appeal of parodies on classical literature in the Edo
Period.**

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Popular prints depicting kabuki actors, courtesans, and the like, enjoyed a wide circulation during the Edo period (1603-1868) and they each had their own appeal. People would buy prints because a famous kabuki actor they were fan of was depicted on it, or they would buy a print with a *bijin* (“beautiful person”) on it, because of its visual appeal. There are many reasons for people to buy certain prints and many factors that could contribute to a print’s appeal, like the topic, a specific person or a hidden – perhaps even political – message.

In this paper the print that will be discussed is Suzuki Harunobu’s “Couple Eloping”, which is a parody of the Akuta River scene from the Tale of Ise. What makes this print a parody, and what was the appeal of such parodies on classical literature to the regular Edo townspeople? Hopefully this paper sheds some light on these questions.



Figure 1: Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770), Couple Eloping, 1768-1769, Woodblock print (nishiki-e), Ink and color on paper, Height 27.5 cm, Width 20 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accession number 21.4486

Couple Eloping, a parody?

“Couple Eloping” is a *nishiki-e* (“brocade picture”) woodblock print designed by the *ukiyo-e* artist Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770) and published in 1768-69. Not much is certain about Harunobu’s life, but he is known to be the first major artist who made full-color woodblock prints (*nishiki-e*).¹ He is also a specialist in *mitate* pictures.

The exact definition of *mitate* is still a topic of discussion. Alfred Haft discusses it elaborately in his “Ukiyo and the Edo Floating World”. He mentions the definitions other researches have assigned to it, like “visual allusions”, but Haft doesn’t really end up giving a clear definition himself. He states:

*“The problem is that the word mitate invariably appears on ukiyo-e prints that were designed along entirely different conceptual lines, and modern scholarship applies the label mitate in conflicting ways.”*²

However, in “Obtaining Images: Art, Production and Display in Edo Japan” Timon Screech does give a clear description:

*“Mitate is a common term indicating the introduction of some unexpected item, a sliding across, to register aesthetic shock or amusement. The period terms for Floating World mitate are rather more complex. There was furyū (urbane) and yatsushi (dressed-down), and the portmanteau furyūyatsushi. A reasonable collective translation may be ‘refashioning’, with emphasis on the fashion.”*³

When talking about *mitate* in terms of ‘refashioning’ Harunobu’s “Couple Eloping” fits the bill perfectly, for it depicts characters from a Heian period literary work in the guise and fashion of Harunobu’s own time. Harunobu takes the classical and elite and brings it down to popular culture.

According to Kimi Coaldrake in her “*Nishiki-e* and *Kumi-uta*: Innovations in Edo Popular Prints and Music in Suzuki Harunobu's Descending Geese of the Koto” *mitate-e* are ‘parody

¹ “Harunobu,” JapanKnowledge, viewed on 13 December, 2017, <http://japanknowledge.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/lib/en/display/?lid=10800FA000506>

² Alfred Haft, “Ukiyo and the Edo Floating World,” in *Aesthetic Strategies of the Floating World: Mitate, Yatsushi, and Fūryū in Early Modern Japanese Popular Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 34

³ Timon Screech, *Obtaining Images: Art, Production and Display in Edo Japan* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2012), 290

pictures' that take elements of historical or legendary events, literature and classical paintings, and use them to humorously portray a contemporary figure or event.⁴

The Tales of Ise, iconography

Looking at Harunobu's print, there are three significant things that stand out: the river, the weeping willow and the woman on the man's back. The reason that these stand out, is that when comparing this print to others depicting the same scene, which is episode 6 from the Tales of Ise, these three icons are also present.

For example, figure 2 shows the "Eloping Couple at the Akuta River" made by Katsukawa Shunshō not long after Harunobu's "Couple Eloping". The river, the willow, the woman on the man's back, it is all there, though left in the original time period.

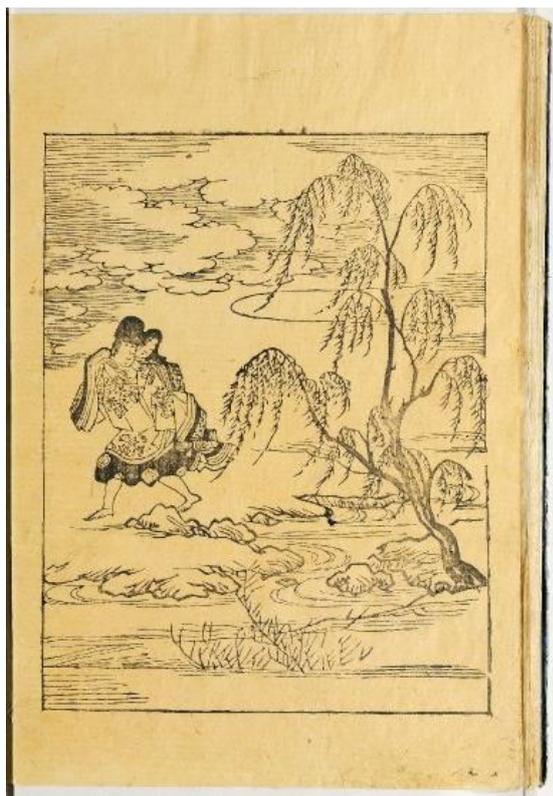


Figure 3: *Ise monogatari*, 1608-1610, Woodblock print, Height 25.1 cm, Width 18.5 cm, British Museum, London, museum number 1979,0305,0.1.1



Figure 2: Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-1792), The Syllable Ni: Eloping Couple at the Akuta River, from the series Tales of Ise in Fashionable Brocade Prints (*Fūryū nishiki-e Ise monogatari*), 1770-1773, Woodblock print (*nishiki-e*), Ink and color on paper, Height 22.6 cm, Width 15.8 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accession number 21.4294

⁴ Kimi Couldrake, *Nishiki-e and Kumi-uta: Innovations in Edo Popular Prints and Music in Suzuki Harunobu's Descending Geese of the Koto Bridges (Kotoji no rakugan)* (publisher, 2012), 118

Looking at episode 6 of the Tale of Ise, the Akuta river and the woman on the man's back are mentioned – depending on whether one reads the Ise with the 'ancient' commentary or the 'old' commentary – but the weeping willow is mentioned nowhere.

“A certain man had for years courted a most inaccessible lady. One pitch-black night he finally spirited her out of her apartments and ran off with her. As they passed a stream called the Akutagawa, she caught a glimpse of a dewdrop on a blade of grass and asked him what it was. The journey ahead was long, the hour had grown late, and the torrential rain was pouring down, punctuated by frightful peals of thunder. The man put the lady inside a ruined storehouse and stationed himself in the doorway with his bow and quiver on his back, never dreaming that the place was haunted by demons. But while he was standing there longing for daybreak, a demon ate the lady up in one gulp. A thunderclap muffled her scream in terror. When the sky finally began to lighten a bit, the man peered inside and saw that the lady was gone. Frantic with helpless grief, he recited,

<i>Shiratama ka</i>	<i>When my beloved asked,</i>
<i>Nani zo to hito no</i>	<i>“Is it a clear gem</i>
<i>Toishi toki</i>	<i>Or what might it be?”</i>
<i>Tsuyu to kotaete</i>	<i>Would that I had replied,</i>
<i>Kienamashi mono o.</i>	<i>“A dewdrop!” and perished.</i>

It is said that while the future Empress from the Second Ward was in attendance upon her cousin, the imperial consort, someone was fascinated by her beauty and carried her off on his back. Her brothers, Mototsune and Kunitsune, who were minor officials then, happened to be on their way to the imperial palace. They heard someone wailing, halted the abductor, and took the lady back. They were the devils the author talks about. The lady was still very young and had not yet ceased to be a commoner.”⁵

When the scene was depicted in its Sagabon version, the weeping willow was added, and this version came to serve as a model for other portrayals of the scene.⁶ This was due to the fact

⁵ Helen Craig MacCullough, *Tales of Ise : lyrical episodes from tenth-century Japan* (Stanford University Press, 1968), 72-73

⁶ Yasuda Atsuo, *Man and Woman in Ise monogatari-e: Scene Selection in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 140

that the Sagabon version was a printed book. Because of the Edo print culture the Sagabon version enjoyed a wide circulation, thus creating the first standardization of Ise imagery.⁷

The appeal of Couple Eloping

In order to find out what the appeal of a print like this would have been, one must first discuss its meaning. How could this print have been interpreted?

One of the first things to look at is the reason the weeping willow was added. Weeping willow trees have an unusually short life span compared to other trees⁸, which could have a meaning similar to that of the cherry blossoms, that are often represented in the images of the floating world.

Another possibility can be found in Chinese symbolism, wherein the weeping willow represents humility, because it seems to be bowing.⁹ However, this meaning may not fit that well within the overall story.

Yet another possibility might seem farfetched, but since prints have multiple layers and *mitate-e* used diverse literary and pictorial sources,¹⁰ one could even go as far as to consider the possibility of a reference to the story The Spirit of the Willow Tree. This is a story about a man called Heitaro who stopped the villagers in need of a bridge from cutting a willow tree down. The next day he found a beautiful girl near the tree. She eventually marries him and grants him a son. In the end the villagers are ordered to cut the willow down due to a need for timber and Heitaro's wife turns out to be the spirit of the willow tree. She dies with the tree and Heitaro has to let her go.¹¹ The loss that is expressed in this story is similar to the loss of the man in episode 6. Even though this might be a farfetched yet possible idea behind Harunobu's work, it seems less likely for the Sagabon version.

The most likely scenario is that the Sagabon added the weeping willow for whatever symbolic purpose, and Harunobu simply used it as a part of the standard iconography.

⁷ Joshua Mostow, *Courtly Visions: The Ise Stories and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 187

⁸ The Spruce, "Weeping Willow Growing Profile," updated on 21 November, 2017, <https://www.thespruce.com/weeping-willow-trees-salix-babylonica-3269357>

⁹ Industrial District Green, "Tree Symbolism in Chinese Culture," viewed on 13 December, 2017, http://www.industrialdistrictgreen.org/tree_symbolism_in_chinese_culture

¹⁰ Bell, David Raymond, "Learning, Play, and Creativity: Asobi, Suzuki Harunobu, and the Creative Practice," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 88

¹¹ Richard Gordon Smith, *Ancient Tales and Folk-lore of Japan* (1918), 12-18

Then, what was the appeal of Harunobu's "Couple Eloping"? Due to the wide circulation of prints in the Edo period the printed version of the Tale of Ise made the story accessible to a broader audience.¹² In the eighteenth century the Ise became particularly popular due to which the number of printed editions increased.¹³ What followed was the appropriation of the Ise by popular culture in various forms like kabuki plays, comic poetry, popular fiction and woodblock prints such as Harunobu's print. Often these works were *mitate* in which the aristocracy was brought down to the level of the urban.¹⁴

In Harunobu's print this refashioning is done by dressing the figures on the print – who are supposed to represent Heian aristocrats – in popular Edo fashion. The common Edo townspeople would most likely have enjoyed seeing such high-status figures as not so different from themselves. There might even be a critique behind this on the class differences: even though aristocrats seem to be way up there and commoners way down here, they're all people and in their core they are not so different at all. Or perhaps this critique could apply to the contrast between past and present. The Heian period could have been seen as a time of sophistication and cultural height in comparison to the Edo period. However, dressing Heian figures as Edo people might convey the message of the two time periods being on the same level, which would be a reason to depict a scene from a literary classic from the Heian period such as the Tale of Ise. Harunobu's print may suggest that, even though Heian is a glorified past, Edo does not simply rest in its shadow, but is instead a period in its own right. This could have enforced a sense of pride amongst Edo commoners.

Another appeal Harunobu's print could have had, is the challenge it poses to its audience. *Mitate-e* were not simply escapist or passively amusing in nature, but actually engaged with their audience and required their active participation.¹⁵ Harunobu's prints were covered in intellectual and sensory riddles that challenged the viewers¹⁶ to use their background knowledge, which they had gained due to their high literacy and affluence.¹⁷

¹² Peter F. Kornicki, "Unsuitable Books for Women?" *Monumenta Nipponica* 60, no. 2 (2005), 147

¹³ Joshua Mostow, *Courtly Visions: The Ise Stories and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 245

¹⁴ Joshua Mostow, *Courtly Visions: The Ise Stories and the Politics of Cultural Appropriation* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 6-7

¹⁵ Bell, David Raymond, "Learning, Play, and Creativity: Asobi, Suzuki Harunobu, and the Creative Practice," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 87

¹⁶ Bell, David Raymond, "Learning, Play, and Creativity: Asobi, Suzuki Harunobu, and the Creative Practice," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 105

¹⁷ Bell, David Raymond, "Learning, Play, and Creativity: Asobi, Suzuki Harunobu, and the Creative Practice," in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 87-88

Conclusion

Regarding the appeal of Suzuki Harunobu's "Couple Eloping", the goal of the print could have been to remove the contrast between the aristocracy to the urban culture and argue that everyone is the same at their core. Then again, it could also have been the contrast between past and present that it sought to soften, by placing the Heian characters in the guise of Edo commoners and thus placing them on the same level, or possibly even placing Edo above the Heian culture. This could have fed the pride of the Edo commoners for their own culture.

Furthermore, Harunobu's "Couple Eloping" offered a great intellectual challenge and maybe even an interesting topic of discussion amongst friends. In this time of democratization of information and a massive printing culture, Edo commoners enjoyed a relatively high literacy, enabling them to gain complex knowledge and understand hidden messages in *mitate-e*.

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