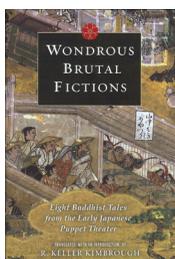


Japan



R. Keller Kimbrough, trans. with an Introduction,
*Wondrous Brutal Fictions: Eight Buddhist Tales from the Early
Japanese Puppet Theater*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 288 pages, appendixes,
glossary, bibliography. Cloth, \$55.00/£38.00. ISBN 978-0-231-14658-6.

KELLER KIMBROUGH'S *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* is a translation of eight works conventionally described using the term *sekkyō*, a pseudo-religious “medieval and early Edo-period ‘sermon-ballad’ storytelling genre” (268) focused on karma, Buddhist merit, and the divine origins of Buddhist icons. Kimbrough brings English-language readers lively, engaging renderings of representative titles from the genre, filled with

instances of miraculous births, gloomy sequences about children separated from their families, solitary wanderings, torture, disfiguration, death, and eventual redemption through Buddhist merits. The book includes reproductions of more than fifty illustrations—some printed and some done by hand, some of scenes within the stories themselves, and some of theatrical presentations—taken from a variety of sources including literary works and *shōhon* (“true texts”), which purported to reproduce performance manuscripts used by professional chanters. *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* is a welcome addition to a small body of English-language translations and studies of *sekkyō* and early puppet theater that includes DUNN (1966); MATISOFF (1978), her detailed and thorough treatment of *sekkyō* as a genre (1992), and her later scholarship on specific titles such as *Karukaya* and *Oguri*; ISHII (1989); and MORRISON (2006) and her recent articles on the topic. Its publication makes it possible for the first time to fully integrate *sekkyō* into classes on premodern Japanese literature and theater from several different perspectives: as part of the broader performative and literary landscape of the sixteenth century, as one popular descendent of medieval performed narratives (*katarimono*), as an instance of the manner in which lay priests used religious elements in entertainment, and as a way of approaching early-Tokugawa puppet performance and the issues surrounding its textual circulation in early modern Japan.

Wondrous Brutal Fictions opens with a helpful introduction that traces the evolution of *sekkyō* from medieval “street-corner *sekkyō*” (*kado-sekkyō*) to an early modern theatrical spectacle staged in urban theaters. Kimbrough shows that in various regions the old *sekkyō* of the sixteenth century were typically chanted under an umbrella “to the rhythmic accompaniment of *sasara*, a kind of notched bamboo scraper” at “bridges, crossroads, and the grounds of temples and shrines” (1), until during the seventeenth century the form found its way into urban theaters as a type of puppet performance accompanied by the *shamisen*. In the mid- to late-seventeenth century, *sekkyō* assumed a place “in the major urban centers of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka as thriving, competing genres of puppet theater, each with its own repertoire and distinctive linguistic conventions” (2–3), only to disappear in the mid-eighteenth century as it was gradually absorbed by *ko-jōruri*, or early puppet theater—a term referring to *jōruri* theater prior to the emergence of the canonical playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725). *Sekkyō* thus belongs to a broadly defined genre of early-Tokugawa puppet theater, but was in practice distinguished from *ko-jōruri*: *sekkyō* productions were marked as such, featured chanters who specialized in the art, and drew on a repertoire with distinct linguistic characteristics and to some extent themes, even though the uniqueness of *sekkyō* gradually gave way as the genre imitated and absorbed the conventions of *ko-jōruri*. As Kimbrough explains, “*sekkyō* survives in a limited number of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century woodblock printed *shōhon* ‘true texts,’ which date from the age in which *sekkyō* had begun to move into urban theaters and to be influenced by the *ko-jōruri* puppet theater” (268). The translations are thus based on particular iterations of *sekkyō* works that occupy a particular position in the history of the genre’s development.

The eight *sekkyō* works shed new light on nearly a century of early modern theatrical productions that preceded the Genroku period (1688–1704) and Chikamatsu Monzaemon, whose plays have profoundly shaped our understanding of early modern theater history. Kimbrough’s translations, in fact, point to the survival and indeed popularity of tropes and sensibilities from the late medieval period even in urban centers during

the seventeenth century, in the roughly nine decades before Chikamatsu began creating his tightly woven *jōruri* texts centering on urban struggles between private feelings and duties in the contexts of a highly stratified feudal society and a monetary economy. Almost all these *sekkyō* texts are set in locales far removed from urban centers, and the translations are replete with scenes of tearful family separations and the lonely travels of protagonists living in extreme poverty. In *Sanshō Dayū*, two young children are sold and separated from their mother and must endure being forced to labor as slaves. Aigo in *Aigo-no-waka* eventually commits suicide after being brutally beaten by his relatives and wandering in the mountains, living a miserable life as a beggar. In *Shintokumaru*, the protagonist, abandoned by his parents, lives as a blind, disfigured beggar, and Oguri in *Oguri* returns from hell on a cart as a “hungry ghost” (*gaki*) and has to rely on volunteers to pull him where he wants to go. These *sekkyō* works exhibit an enduring early modern fascination with karmic tragedy that supersedes human agency (as opposed to the man-made tragedies that often dominate views of early modern theater), as well as with brutal, solitary itinerancy and work at the bottom of the social ladder, perhaps reflecting the experiences and world views of the outcast itinerant performers who chanted *sekkyō* on the roads. In his introduction, Kimbrough also emphasizes the particularly brutal nature of the tales, highlighting their copious depictions of violence and torture alongside the celebration of “psychological strength and the power of the human will” (17). The almost overly sentimental subject matter, the crude violence, and the harsh views of life in rural areas, combined with the strength of character that allows the protagonists to endure hardships, speaks volumes about the tastes of early modern urban audiences in the mid-seventeenth century, before Chikamatsu’s time. It is telling, in this sense, that *sekkyō*’s influence lasted longest in Edo, a city that brought people from all regions and backgrounds together.

The study of *sekkyō* helps connect important tropes in later puppet theater such as the famous “travel sequence” (*michiyuki*) and “scenes of lamenting” (*shūtanba*) to their early modern social environment in much more grounded terms. All eight *sekkyō* works translated in this collection include travel-guide-like lists of the places characters travel to in dismay, perhaps indicating that one of their important functions was to cater to travelers who heard the tales on the streets, or that these works helped map certain geographical spaces. In later *jōruri*, traveling still played an important function, but it had undergone a sort of conceptual transformation so that it highlighted characters’ emotional and dramatic states. One example of this is the list of bridges that the lovers cross before their double suicide in a celebrated scene in Chikamatsu’s *Shinjū ten no Amijima* (Love suicide at Amijima, 1720); this scene helps the lovers and the audience watching them reflect on their lives and on their symbolic descent to hell. *Sekkyō* also favored tearful and sorrow-filled moments of separation among family members, while later works for the puppet theater found it more fruitful and poetic to create drama in the context of amorous relationships. Noting these differences also helps us revisit and confirm the nature of the distinctiveness of the early modern experimentation and innovation that gradually took form in later puppet theater, allowing us to reexamine well-known early modern plays and the manner in which they built on earlier theatrical materials.

As I have noted, *sekkyō* originates in the sixteenth century, but the large majority of surviving texts are from the time after *sekkyō* was transformed into a type of puppet performance in the early modern period. It is significant that most texts date from a period when *sekkyō* was going through something of a revival, and that most were

published via the new medium of commercial woodblock printing. Kimbrough is well aware of the early modern textual identity of *sekkyō*, but also of the potential it has to be read as an embodiment of traces of medieval chanted narratives. He has thus made eclectic editorial choices, working not from a single collection of annotated transcriptions as his source text but from various major collections such as the *sekkyō* volumes in the Iwanami Koten Bungaku Taikai (SHINODA and SAKAGUCHI eds., SNKBT 90, 1999), the Shinchō Nihon Koten Shūsei (MUROKI ed. 1977), and Tōyō Bunko (ARAKI and YAMAMOTO eds., Tōyō bunko 243, 1973), cross-referencing these typeset texts with facsimile editions and/or with a secondary text. Kimbrough's translations thus derive from a variety of different types of texts, ranging from the woodblock printed *shōhon*, which is most closely connected with the theater, to hand-copied books with lavish illustrations known as *Nara ehon* (Nara picture books) and rare picture scrolls, the texts of which are often included today in literary anthologies. While Kimbrough does not discuss his editorial principles in detail, it seems that when possible he has chosen texts that retain phrasing and formats typical of older *sekkyō*, while at the same time avoiding early editions that have large omissions or missing parts. For this reason, he sometimes includes texts that might be thought of as “readerly versions”—texts that are included in literary anthologies today with *monogatari* or *shōsetsu* in the title—when they are thought to retain traces of the characteristics of older *sekkyō* or earlier *shōhon* texts. This is the case, for instance, with the source text of Kimbrough's translation of *Sayohime*, which is a *Nara ehon* at Kyoto University printed in transcribed form in SHIMAZU ed., (1928) and in transcribed or facsimile form in other *sekkyō* collections. The degree of care Kimbrough invested in selecting the best text for translation is evident from the impressive appendix he includes categorizing extant *sekkyō*, showing how some were marketed as *shōhon* while others were sold as illustrated popular fiction. Kimbrough provides bibliographical notes and information about the texts' location in archives, as well as lists of available modern transcriptions, annotations, or facsimile reproductions. Kimbrough surveyed each textual variant in order to create a sort of archetypical text that shows as much as possible a fairly early style of the work while simultaneously avoiding omissions or incompleteness.

At the same time, it is interesting to observe that the order in which Kimbrough presents the *sekkyō* he has chosen to translate seems to echo the gradual changes that took place in the textual circulation of *sekkyō* in terms of language and subject matter. Kimbrough writes:

In light of the seventeenth-century history of *sekkyō*, the works translated in this volume are perhaps best understood as occupying points on a continuum between “pure” *sekkyō* and *ko-jōruri*, with *Karukaya* (1631), *Sanshō Dayū* (ca. 1639), and *Shintokumaru* (1648) representing a relatively older form of *sekkyō*; the six-act *Aigo-no-waka* (ca. 1670) representing the genre of *sekkyō-jōruri* (*sekkyō* under the heavier influence of *ko-jōruri*); and *Amida no munewari* (1651) and *Gōō-no-hime* (1673) representing *ko-jōruri*. The undated *Oguri* and *Sayohime* manuscripts represent an early- to mid-seventeenth century form of *sekkyō*, but as either illustrated transcriptions of *sekkyō* performances or novelistic adaptations of *sekkyō shōhon*. (9)

While early publications of *sekkyō* works were simply divided into three books or parts, as we read through the collection we find that the texts start adapting the six-act style

common in published *ko-jōruri* plays. The framing device featuring place names and the association of the protagonist with important Buddhist icons, which was typical in early *sekkyō* such as *Sanshō Dayū* and *Karuyaka*, was similarly replaced later on by, for instance, the name of the emperor to designate a historical era in *Aigo-no-waka*—a framing device typical of later puppet theater. In addition, battle scenes more suited to *shamisen* accompaniment than *sasara* begin to crop up in the later tales, indicating in another manner the gradual transformation that *sekkyō* underwent as it absorbed influential theatrical themes and styles.

Naturally, editors must always make certain sacrifices in order to produce texts suitable for use in undergraduate and graduate classrooms. The flip side of a readable, typical text is the smoothing out of certain irregularities that are specific to individual texts or books. Kimbrough mentions in his introduction that “there is nothing to distinguish the pre-1658 *sekkyō shōhon* (*Sanshō Dayū*, *Karukaya*, and *Shintokumaru*) from the non-playbook manuscripts included here (*Oguri* and *Sayohime*)” (10), and that “the extant *shōhon* and illustrated manuscripts give little indication of what an actual performance may have been like” (10). There is a certain truth to this, but at the same time certain performative codes were important to *shōhon* from at least sometime in the seventeenth century. Chanter’s names were often written at the beginning of *shōhon*, including those for *sekkyō*, sometimes in characters even larger than the title of the work. For instance, the 1639 book that forms the basis for the translation of *Sanshō Dayū* opens with a big announcement that this is “The Release of the Greatest Sekkyō Chanter Yoshichirō’s ‘True Text’” (Tenkaichi Sekkyō Yoshichiro shōhon hiraku), while the 1648 *Shintokumaru* book also opens with “The ‘true text’ of the Greatest Sado Shichidayū” (Tenka musō Sado Shichidayū shōhon). These statements clearly marked the performative identity of the text, and must to some degree have conditioned the experience of the reader, even though they represented a commercial strategy initiated by the bookstores in collaboration with the theater, rather than the other way around. The decision not to include this information certainly is not unique to this collection of translations: even in Japanese critical editions, different editors make different choices about whether to reproduce or omit such statements. In this case, Kimbrough’s decision not to include information about chanters was most likely inspired by a desire to give appropriate weight to consistency and readability, since some of the *sekkyō* source texts he used were themselves published as “readerly” works. Even in the case of *shōhon* texts, there are irregularities: many texts omit any reference to a chanter or simply note at the end that it is a chanter’s “true text” without giving the chanter’s name (this is the case, for instance, with the source text that Kimbrough used for *Aigo-no-waka*). Kimbrough still marks the performative identity of *sekkyō* by including as an appendix a detailed list and profiles of early modern *sekkyō* chanters. This allows him both to give each translation in *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* a smooth, readable feel and to make the book useful for scholars who are interested in the extra-textual world of performance and its social contexts.

The publication of translations like *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* both helps expand the field of Japanese literature as it exists in English-language contexts, and makes it possible to think in the context of Japanese studies about the fleeting nature of performance, and about the embodiment of performative materials in textual form at specific periods in history. On some level, even published *sekkyō* texts partake in a specifically performative fluidity. For instance, the text Kimbrough used as the source for his translation of *Oguri*

notes at the end that Oguri is the human form of Aizome Myōō of Kitano Shrine, which is incongruous with his identity as the son of Shō Hachiman Shrine, mentioned in the opening. This has been regarded as a compromise in which associations were provided to link Oguri to the place in which the *sekkyō* was being performed, and so that the content of the text reflects spontaneous changes that found their way into the textual forms *sekkyō* assumed (TOKUDA 1976; ARAKI 1998). The absence of information about the performance that prompted this insertion—the inaccessibility of the vanished moment in which it occurred—is a challenge all of us studying performance must face. That challenge is relevant beyond the fields of performance and theater studies, however: the attempt to question the stability of texts and to learn, through them, more about things texts themselves may not be able to tell us is very exciting, and has the potential to lead to important contributions to the broader field of Japanese studies.

In sum, *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* is both the product of a careful, scholarly approach to selection and editing and an eminently readable and approachable translation that can be used and enjoyed in both undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Along with important translated anthologies of premodern theatrical works (see TYLER 1993; BRAZELL ed. 1998; KEENE 1998; and BRANDON and LEITER, eds. 2002–2003, to list just a few examples), I believe *Wondrous Brutal Fictions* will be widely used in the study of late medieval and early modern theater and literature, helping to expand the range of what is possible in the study and teaching of premodern Japanese theater, literature, and culture.

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