

Mitate in Actor Prints —Anticipation and Juxtaposition—

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Introduction

The concept of *mitate* is well known from the study of Harunobu's prints. However, the use of the word *mitate* in actor prints is not generally recognised except by specialists in actor prints. Therefore, I would here like to discuss the concept of *mitate* in actor prints, hoping that this will lead readers to reconsider the meaning of *mitate* in the Edo period.

Harunobu's *mitate* are usually understood as a kind of 1) parody, 2) reworking, 3) elegant, updated version, or 4) transformation of some traditional literary or artistic theme. However, *mitate* in actor prints are quite different from any of these meanings in form and function.

There are two types of *mitate* in actor prints. The first is a 'dream cast' for a kabuki play. In this type of actor print, artists depict the actors in roles they have not actually performed yet. These are either 1) roles the actors are going to perform or 2) roles kabuki fans would love to see them perform or wish the actors had performed previously. Therefore, these depictions can be considered imaginary. This category can thus be said to deal with anticipation.

The second kind of *mitate* arises from a witty juxtaposition of actors or actors' roles with completely different categories or themes. The connections or the correlations do not make sense at first glance, so this type of *mitate* is a sort of riddle or puzzle. It works through juxtaposition of unrelated elements.

First, I would like to discuss some instances of 'dream cast' *mitate*, and then I would like to view some examples of riddle or puzzle *mitate*. Finally, I would like to consider what these two kinds of actor *mitate* prints might have in common.

'Dream cast' *mitate*

There is a diptych by Utagawa Kunisada, on whose right sheet is depicted Ichikawa Danjūrō VII as Shirai Gompachi preparing to play *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute). On the left sheet is depicted Sawamura Tanosuke II as Komurasaki preparing to play *koto*.¹ This must be a scene from one of the famous Gompachi Komurasaki plays, in which, generally, the wanted masterless *samurai* Gompachi comes to the Yoshiwara quarters to bid farewell to his lover Komurasaki, a high-ranking courtesan who was said in legend to have committed suicide later in front of Gompachi's grave.

The diptych contains the word '*mitate*' on each print. It is impossible to identify a performance of this play in which these two actors actually performed these roles, so the diptych cannot be dated by linking it to a specific performance. However, there are some clues that help us date it. One is the style of the signature. The other is the information we have about the actors' careers.

The style of the signature by Kunisada indicates that the print was probably published in 1815 or 1816 (Bunka 12 or 13).² Sawamura Tanosuke came to Edo in the eleventh month of 1815 (Bunka 12), after a two-year stay in the Kamigata area. Just after his return to Edo, he fell ill, and he tried to commit suicide during his illness. Fortunately he did not succeed in killing himself, but he needed time to recover from his sickness and his self-inflicted wound. He therefore could not perform in the first month of 1816, when a play about Komurasaki and Gompachi entitled *Sono kouta yume mo Yoshiwara* was performed as a part of *Hiyoku no chō haru no Soga-giku*. In those performances,

Danjūrō VII played the role of Gompachi.³ If Sawamura Tanosuke had been well, he would have played Komurasaki, because he was the leading *onnagata* (actor of female roles) at the Nakamura-za Theatre. Instead, Komurasaki was played that year by Onoe Kikugorō III, who sometimes played female roles but who did not specialise in them. *Sono kouta yume mo Yoshiwara*, now a famous play, was recorded to have been first performed by Danjūrō VII and Kikugorō III in 1816. However, the diptych interestingly demonstrates that Komurasaki's role happened to be performed by Kikugorō only by chance.

There is a diptych that can confirm the above explanation.⁴ The word *mitate* does not appear on the diptych, but the figures in the diptych are identical with those in the diptych described above except for the actor playing Komurasaki. Onoe Kikugorō III, whose role is the same as in the play in 1816, performs Komurasaki, in the diptych. Therefore, there is no doubt that the second diptych was published in conjunction with the performance of the play *Sono kouta yume mo Yoshiwara* in 1816. Which was published first, Tanosuke in the first diptych or Kikugorō in the second diptych? The answer is: the former was published first. The second diptych was published using the blocks of the first diptych and recarving Tanosuke's name and face. This is obvious, because Kikugorō as Komurasaki still wears Tanosuke's pattern, called *kanze-mizu*, on his robe.

In my opinion, when the first print was published, it was impossible for Tanosuke to perform the role. However, most people surely felt that Tanosuke *should* have played the role. One reason was that he was the leading *onnagata* at the Nakamura-za Theatre, at which the play was going to be performed, and the second reason was that his suicide attempt suited him for the role of Komurasaki, who was said to have committed suicide. Therefore, the diptych shows a well-matched 'dream cast' that kabuki fans wanted to see, and it was an extremely nice advertisement for the production. In reality, however, another actor played Komurasaki when the play was performed.



Plate 1 (Iwata Kazuo Collection)



Plate 2 (the Ikeda Bunk Library)

The diptych by Toyokuni I in *Plate 1* depicts Bandō Mitsugorō III as Nuregami no Chōgorō and Nakamura Utaemon III as Hanaregoma no Chōkichi.⁵ The scene in which they are depicted is from the *Sumōba* act of the play *Futatsu chōchō kuruwanikki*, the quarrel scene in front of a sumō-wrestling stadium. The sumō wrestler Nuregami no Chōgorō purposely loses the match to the amateur wrestler Hanaregoma no Chōkichi. After the match, Chōgorō asks Chōkichi to stop one of his patrons from ransoming the courtesan Azuma because Chōgorō's own patron would like to ransom her himself. However, Chōkichi



Plate 3



Plate 4

refuses, and they quarrel. Chōgorō, as who is a professional sumō wrestler, easily crushes his teacup in his hand, but Chōkichi, who is an amateur, can't do it, though he pretends to do so by hitting his teacup on his sword hilt when standing behind Chōgorō. This is the scene depicted here.

Plate 2 is identical with *Plate 1* except for one detail. *Plate 3* and *Plate 4* are enlargements of the role names. *Plate 3* is a detail from *Plate 1*, while *Plate 4* is a detail from *Plate 2*. The impression is rather light, but it is possible to see the word *mitate* on *Plate 4* and the word *kudari*,

which means “coming down” from the Kamigata area to Edo, on *Plate 3*. But the print in *Plate 4* has been heavily trimmed, so it may also have had *kudari* inscribed on it. In any case, the word *kudari* indicates that the publication of the diptych was connected with the Utaemon’s “coming down” to Edo from the Kamigata area.

Nakamura Utaemon III performed in Edo during three periods: first from 1808 to 1812 (Bunka 5 to 9); second from 1814 to 1815 (Bunka 11 to 12); and third from 1818 to 1819 (Bunsei 1 to Bunsei 2). On the basis of the form of Toyokuni’s signature on this print, it must have been published during the time of his second visit to Edo in 1814 (Bunka 11). Actually, the two actors performed exactly these roles in the sixth month of 1814 at the Nakamura-za Theatre. Then why do some impressions of this design carry the word *mitate* on them, even though the play was actually performed?

Plate 5 consists of the signatures by Toyokuni on this diptych. Also shown here are the seal of the publisher, Yamamoto Heikichi, and the *gyōji aratame* seal, which we know was used by the censor Hamamatsu-ya Kōsuke in the fourth month of 1814 but not in the fifth

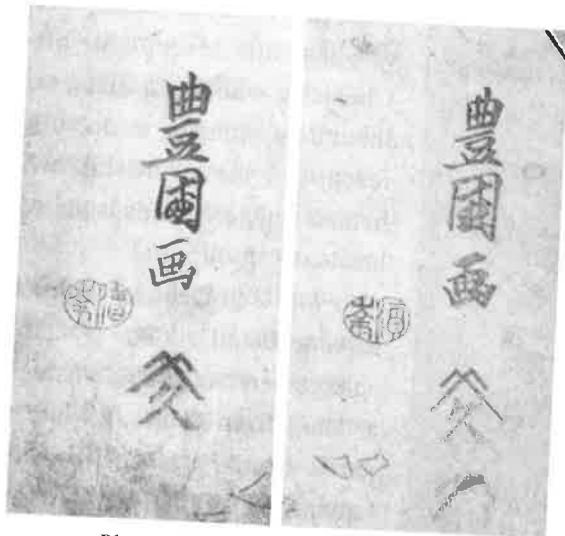


Plate 5 (Enlargements from *Plate 2*)

and sixth months of that year. This proves that the first impression of either *Plate 1* or *Plate 2* was published in the fourth month of 1814, which was two months before the actual performances of the play by these actors. Which of the impressions was, then, published first?

Utaemon and Mitsugorō had been rivals during Utaemon’s first stay in Edo, where the actors’ fan clubs enthusiastically supported their favourites. Utaemon and Mitsugorō never performed together during Utaemon’s first visit to Edo, so when it was learned that Utaemon was “coming down” to Edo again, these fans must have hoped that Utaemon and Mitsugorō would perform together in the same play. The *Sumō-ba* act, in which the two wrestlers come into conflict, was an ideal vehicle for bringing the rival actors together.

These circumstances in the theatre world might indicate that the *mitate* impression was published first as a ‘dream cast’, and then, when the play was actually being performed, the word *mitate* was removed from the blocks. However, there is another possibility.⁶ The impression of the word *mitate* is rather lighter than the other parts. Such a difference generally indicates that the lighter part has been put on the blocks afterwards.

Utaemon was scheduled to perform at the Nakamura-za Theatre in the fifth month of 1814, one month after the publication of the print, but he did not actually “come down”. Therefore, the production in the fifth month at the Nakamura-za Theatre was cancelled, and all the actors took vacations at country spas.⁷ There are many cases in the Edo period of actors not “coming down”, though they had planned to. In this case, it must have been thought that Utaemon would never “come down”, and the *Sumō-ba* act turned into a ‘dream cast’, although Utaemon actually did “come down” later. The *mitate* impression could be published at this point, after the performance was cancelled, showing that the play had changed into a dream.

In any case, the *mitate* impression depicts the scene that kabuki fans eagerly want to see, or wanted to see, by the casting.



Plate 6 (Private Collection)

Plate 6 is a single sheet design (*ichimai-e*) entitled *Shimpan* (newly published) *Sembon-zakura mitate yakusha* by Kunisada.⁸ It presents Seki Sanjūrō as Tokai-ya Gimpei, Arashi Kanjūrō as Benkei, Ichimura Uzaemon XII as Yasuke, Iwai Tojaku as Osato, Nakamura Utaemon IV as Tadanobu, Iwai Shijaku as Shizuka, Ichikawa Komazō V as Igami no Gonda, and Bandō Hikosaburō IV as Yoshitsune. All these roles are from the play *Yoshitsune sembon-zakura*. It is impossible to find a listing of a performance of the play *Yoshitsune sembon-zakura* with exactly the same casting as is given in Plate 6. However, these actors were all performing in Edo in 1839 (Tempo 10), so the publication of the print must have been around 1839.

Such ‘dream cast’ *mitate* prints are often encountered. Among the plays treated in this way are *Kana-dehon chūshin-gura*, *Soga no taimen*, *Sukeroku*, etc. These plays were very famous and popular. Artists and their publishers knew that prints offering this type of imaginary all-star casting would be popular with theatre fans and sell well.

The three examples discussed here represent different kinds of ‘dream cast’ *mitate* prints. In all of them we find artists and publishers offering what they thought kabuki fans would like to see. The castings are imaginary. That is, they are real ‘dream castings’.

Riddle or Puzzle *mitate*

In this part, I would like to examine how the examples of riddle or puzzle *mitate* work.

The print in Plate 7, entitled *Mitate jūni-shi no uchi, ne* by Kuniyoshi, was published in the sixth month of 1852 (Kaei 5). In the series, each of the twelve animals of the zodiac is paired with a role from a kabuki play. The ‘*ne*’ of this print is the ‘rat’ sign of the zodiac; it is linked to the roles of Nikki Danjō and Arajishi Otoko-no-suke. What is the connection between the zodiacal animal and these kabuki roles? The link between the two is made clear by the plot of the kabuki play. If a kabuki play is very famous, it is easy for people today to grasp the link. But if the kabuki play is one that is very rarely performed today, the solution can be quite difficult for modern viewers of actor prints. However, the first example here should be very easy to understand.

These two roles are from *Date sōdō*, the story of a conflict within the Date clan. The actor playing Nikki Danjō is Ichikawa Ebizō V (Danjūrō VII). He can be easily identified by distinctive features—big eyes and a long face—which were always associated with Danjūrō VII at that time. Every print in this series can be linked to a contemporary performance of a kabuki play. Danjūrō VII played the role in the fourth month of 1851 (Kaei 4) in *Date-kurabe uwasa no*



Plate 7 (Koike Shōtarō Collection)

sayaate at Kawarazaki-za Theatre. Therefore, the second actor, whose role is Arajishi Otoko-no-suke in this print, should be Ichikawa Saruzō, though he is not readily identifiable by his features because he is drawn very small.

The scene is from the *Yukashita* act of the play. *Yukashita* means ‘beneath the floorboards’. The scene is very famous and it is still performed today. The evil samurai Nikki Danjō and his cohorts are aiming to usurp the power of the Date daimyō lord by poisoning the lord’s son. However, the nurse Masaoka protects him by sacrificing her own son, who dies when he eats the poisoned cakes. The villains mistakenly assume that Masaoka is on their side because, when her son dies, she shows no emotion. They think that it is the lord’s young son, dressed as Masaoka’s son, who has died and that Masaoka is also aiming to usurp domain power by making her own son the new lord. The key villain sends Masaoka a secret scroll containing the names of the conspirators, but another of the villains discovers that in fact Masaoka is not on their side, and she tries to retrieve the scroll from her. As Masaoka and the villain struggle for the scroll, it falls onto the floor. At that moment a rat appears, snatches the scroll in its mouth, and runs away to hide beneath the floorboards. The struggle ends when Masaoka kills the villain. The *Yukashita* ‘beneath the floorboards’ scene succeeds. Arajishi Otoko-no-suke, who is on his guard under the palace, sees the enormous rat with the scroll in its mouth and strikes the rat on its forehead with his iron fan. Nevertheless, the rat manages to escape, disappearing through a trapdoor, or *suppon*, on the *hanamichi* (projecting ramp connected through the audience to the stage). The rat is in fact Nikki Danjō, who can transform himself into a rat by black magic. Later Nikki Danjō rises up to the *hanamichi* again through the trap door amid clouds of mist in his true form with the scroll still in his mouth. The crescent-shaped mark on his forehead is the wound he received when Arajishi Otoko-no-suke struck him with his iron fan.

The print depicts this famous scene. The connection between the

rat sign of the zodiac and Nikki Danjō is clear to anyone who knows the play. It is very easy, therefore, to find the answer to why Nikki Danjō and Arajishi Otoko-no-suke are juxtaposed with a rat sign.

The print in *Plate 8* is from Toyokuni III’s set *Mitate sanjūrok-kasen*.⁹ The print title is *Ariwara no Narihira Ason*, and it was published in the tenth month of 1852 (Kaei 5). In the print, the name of the poet Ariwara no Narihira is paired with an image of the ghost of the priest Seigen. Ariwara no Narihira was one of the most famous poets of the Heian era, while Seigen is a fictional figure of the Edo period, so these two figures come from completely different worlds. They share no common elements. Why are these two men juxtaposed here?

The clue can be found in the waka poem by Narihira appearing in the square cartouche representing a *shikishi* in the upper right-hand corner of the print and written in *shikishi*-style calligraphy. The poem reads ‘Yononaka ni taete sakura no nakariseba, haru no kokoro wa nodokekaramashi’, which means, ‘Were it not for cherry blossoms, how happy people in this world would be in spring!’ The poem uses contradictory language. People feel annoyed and nervous in the springtime because of their obsession with cherry blossoms, or *sakura*. Traditionally most people looked forward to cherry blossoms before they bloom, and they worried about the storms of spring, which could



Plate 8 (the Machida City Museum of Graphic Arts)



Plate 9 (the Victoria & Albert Museum)

blow blossoms away during one night. Thus cherry blossoms captured people's minds each spring. Narihira expressed rather contradictory feelings about them: he is saying, 'It might be better if there were no cherry blossoms'.

Just like Narihira in his poem, Seigen was also obsessed with 'Sakura', but in his case, 'Sakura' ('Cherry Blossom') was his lover's name. There are many versions of Seigen's story, but the basic plot is as follows: A monk residing at Kiyomizu-dera Temple named Seigen falls in love with Princess Cherry Blossom, or Sakura-hime. By doing so, he breaks his Buddhist vow of chastity. Sakura-hime refuses his advances, but Seigen's obsession is so strong that he cannot accept her rejection. He loses everything in pursuit of her, and even after his death he continues to pursue her as a ghost.

The print, Ariwara no Narihira from the *Mitate sanjūrokkasen* series, depicts the ghost of Seigen pursuing Princess Cherry Blossom.

Seigen, just like Narihira in his poem, would be very happy if there were no *Sakura* — that is, Princess Cherry Blossom. The actor depicted is Ichikawa Danjūrō VIII. He was very high-strung, and in 1851 (Kaei 4), he collapsed on stage. There were rumours at the time that he had died. However, he did not die. His alleged return from death can be compared with Seigen's return from death, so it must have been considered particularly appropriate for him to perform Seigen's ghost. He actually did so in the dancing performance entitled *Yami no ume*



Plate 10 (An enlargement from Plate 9)

yume no tamakura, which was produced as a part of *Koi-goromo kari-gane-zome* at the Kawarazaki-za Theatre eight months after his "revival", or five months before the publication of this print.

The print by Toyokuni III in *Plate 9* depicts the scene in which Ichikawa Danjūrō VIII as Seigen comes back from death to pursue Sakura-hime. Seigen's face and pose in *Plate 10* is exactly the same as in *Mitate sanjūrokkasen*.

This series of *Mitate sanjūrokkasen* offers us a very good example of a puzzle or riddle *mitate*. Two completely different categories are combined here: one is the category of the thirty-six immortal poets of the Heian era, and the other is the category of roles from famous kabuki plays in the Edo era. The elements selected from these two categories are unrelated. The combinations are "brain-teasing collisions", as Timothy Clark has described them.¹⁰ Each combination provides a kind of riddle, and the clue to each riddle can be found in the poems of the thirty-six poet immortals.

Elements in common

I have claimed that there are two distinct kinds of *mitate* actor prints. These I have called ‘Dream cast’ *mitate*, which deals with anticipation, and ‘Puzzle or riddle’ *mitate*, which works through the juxtaposition of completely different elements. The latter is, in my opinion, mainly influenced by *yakusha hyōbanki*, actor critique booklets. They were published twice a year for almost two hundred years. The tables of contents of these booklets liken the actors to trees, flowers, fish, place names, etc. and actually use the word *mitate* when they do this. From around the end of the eighteenth century, and continuing for almost a century, a new style of actor critique sheet prints, the so-called ‘*yakusha ni-gao kyūkin-zuke mitate hyōbanki*’, began to be published once a year in addition to normal actor critique booklets. These critique prints were published until around the beginning of the Meiji era. The form of each print set, consisting of three sheets, seems to me to have been derived from the tables of contents of actor critique booklets. Almost always thirty-six actors were described there along with their portraits, rankings, salaries, addresses, *yagō* (professional clan reference names), and crests. This was done by comparing them with things from quite different categories, and for each there is a *kyōka* poem, which provides the clue or explanation for each pairing.¹¹

Plate 11 shows an example from the first sheet of *Chūshin-gura mitate ō-hyōban* published in the eleventh month of 1816 (Bunka 13). Each of the thirty-six actor is connected with a role from the play *Chūshin-gura*, and for each there is a *kyōka* poem. These *mitate* actor critique sheets combine two characteristics, which I have been referring to as ‘dream cast’ and ‘riddle’. This kind of print is a ‘missing link’, which connects two different types of *mitate* in actor prints. This type of *mitate* actor critique sheet must have had quite a strong influence on *mitate* actor prints.

The puzzle type *mitate* prints only became popular after the Tempo



Plate 11 (Two pages from *Haiyū mitate hyōbanki* from the Kaga-Bunko Collection in the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library)

reforms. This was because of the continuing prohibition against depicting named actors or referring to current kabuki performances in prints. For example, Toyokuni III produced many puzzle *mitate* prints in 1852 (Kaei 5). The Tempo reforms had a great influence on the production of actor prints. Even ten years after the reforms, printers could not publish normal actor prints. No actor names were used, and very simple types of actor prints appeared. However, the regime’s restrictions stimulated artists and publishers to produce extremely interesting riddle *mitate* prints, which combined literature, drama, and visual art together.

All of the examples I have shown here actually carry the word *mitate* on them, while there is no such inscription on Harunobu’s *mitate* prints.¹² It seems clear that these actor prints are the real *mitate* prints; Harunobu’s prints are called *mitate* prints only because of a misunderstanding of the word and concept by modern Japanese scholars.

Notes

- 1 Ellis Tinios, *Mirror of the Stage—The actor prints of Kunisada* (Leeds: the University Gallery Leeds, 1996), Plate 2, p. 18; Timothy T. Clark, “*Mitate-e*: Some

- Thoughts, and a Summary of Recent Writings”, *Impressions*, no. 19 (New York: the Ukiyo-e Society of America, 1997), Fig. 3, p.10. See *Plate A* on the facing page.
- 2 Sekigawa Tōru, “Gototei Kunisada rakkan no hensan”, *Ukiyo-e Geijutsu* (Tokyo: the Japan Ukiyo-e Society, July 1967), 15: 3-17; Shindō Shigeru, *Kunisada—The Kabuki Actor Portraits* (Tokyo: Graphic-sha Publishing, 1993).
 - 3 Ihara Toshiro, *Kabuki nempyō* vol. 5 (Tokyo: Iwanai Shoten, 1960), p. 571; *Ibid*, vol. 6 (1961), p. 4.
 - 4 See *Mita Arts Catalogue* No. 10, photo no. 415 (Tokyo: Mita Arts Gallery, 2001)
 - 5 Iwata Hideyuki, “Yakusha-e nendai kōshō ni okeru mondaiten”, *Kampō Ikeda Bunko* (Osaka: Hankyū Gakuen Ikeda Bunko, April 1998), 12: 9-11.
 - 6 Iwata Kazuo suggested me various possibilities.
 - 7 Ihara, vol. 5, p. 543.
 - 8 Iwata Hideyuki, “Mitate-e ni kansuru gimon”, *Edo bungaku kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shinten-sha, 1993), p. 577.
 - 9 Roger Keyes, *The Male Journey in Japanese Prints* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1989), 92-93; Sebastian Izzard, *Kunisada's World* (New York: Japan Society, 1993), p. 175; Iwata, p. 57.
 - 10 Clark, p.10.
 - 11 Ikeyama Akira, “Bun'un tōzen to yakusha hyōbanki”, *Edo no bunji* (Tokyo: Pelican-sha, 2000), 366-80, especially 379-80; Kurahashi Masae, “Yakusha nigao kyūkin-zuke kō”, *Geinōshi Kenkyū*, (Kyoto: Geinōshi Kenkyū-kai, January 2001), 152: 41-59.
 - 12 There are some prints by Harunobu, however, which actually contain the word ‘mitate’. But the function of these prints is the same as the tables of contents of actor critique booklets, or yakusha hyōbanki, and is different from parody-type pictures. See Iwata, 1993: 578-580; Clark, 13-14.

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Additional Plate



Plate A (The British Museum)