



The Great Mirror of Male Love

Ihara Saikaku

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The first complete translation of *Nanshoku okagami* by Ihara Saikaku (1642-93), this is a collection of 40 stories describing homosexual love affairs between samurai men and boys and between young kabuki actors and their middle-class patrons. Seventeenth-century Kyoto was the center of a flourishing publishing industry, and for the first time in Japan's history it became possible for writers to live exclusively on their earnings. Saikaku was the first to actually do so. As a popular writer, Saikaku wanted to entertain his readership. When he undertook the writing of *Nanshoku okagami* in 1687, it was with the express purpose of extending his readership and satisfying his ambition to be published in the three major cities of his day, Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo. He chose the topic of male homosexual love because it had the broadest appeal both to the samurai men of Edo and to the townsmen of Kyoto and Osaka, his regular audience. Homosexual relations between a man and a boy were a regular feature of premodern Japanese culture and carried no stigma. When a boy reached the age of nineteen, he underwent a coming-of-age ceremony, after which he took the adult role in relations with boys. The first twenty stories in *Nansoku okagami* feature boys from the samurai class whose lives exemplified the ideals of boy love; the second group of twenty stories shifts its focus to young kabuki actors who exemplified boy love in their own way, serving as prostitutes in the theater districts of the three major cities. The stories, which eschew the explicitly erotic, touch on many interesting aspects of life in premodern Japan, notably samurai connoisseurship of boy love, with its emphasis on loyalty between lover and beloved, the Buddhist tradition of love between priests and acolytes as a means of spiritual enlightenment, the life and pleasures of the urban classes, and the world of the kabuki theater.<

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