Off with Their Heads!

The Hirata Disciples and the Ashikaga Shoguns

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On the night of the 22nd day, Second Month, 1863, nine men forced their way into Tōji-in, the mortuary temple of the Ashikaga shoguns on the western outskirts of Kyoto.¹ They tied up the priest, yanked the heads off the statues of the first three Ashikaga shoguns, and carried them to the Kamo river bank south of Sanjō Bridge. On the following morning crowds gathered to witness the edifying sight of the heads pilloried in the name of the vengeance of Heaven. In the view of the men who had committed this deed, disciples of the nativist scholar Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤, all either samurai or commoners from minor domains, the early Ashikaga shoguns had been and still were traitors to the throne. Exposing the heads both settled an old score and, by way of promoting the cause of revering the emperor and expelling the barbarians (sonnō jōi 尊皇攘夷), served as a warning to shogunal officials, even the shogun himself, that ignoring the emperor’s wishes would bring punishment.

The Kyoto authorities were not amused. In a rare display of force, they rounded up the perpetrators, imprisoned them, and threatened to execute them. Those who escaped arrest fled the city or went into hiding. Only a wave of appeals for pardon directed at the imperial court saved the prisoners’ lives, but they spent the following five years in dominal custody. With many of their colleagues dispersed or dead, the role of the Hirata disciples in the Meiji Restoration had effectively ended.

For Western historians of the Restoration, decapitating the Ashikaga shoguns’ statues simply indicated hostility to Tokugawa Iemochi 徳川家茂 on the eve of the first visit by a shogun to Kyoto in 230 years. In fact, the incident has been ignored in English-language writings except by Albert Craig, Marius Jansen, and Thomas Huber, and these scholars make no distinction between its

¹ All dates are given hereafter according to the lunar calendar in month-day order.
perpetrators on the one hand and, on the other, the loyalist samurai, most of them not Hirata disciples, who used assassination as a weapon of intimidation.\(^2\) Sometimes the loyalists killed in revenge, for example, for the execution of Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰 and others in 1859, but they acted just as often to silence moderate nobles and support the obscurantists at court who demanded immediate expulsion of the barbarians. As a tactical device, such measures were effective, at least in the short run, although without the protection of the Chōshū domain the terrorists would have found it much more difficult to maneuver in safety.\(^3\) Harry Harootunian has called these men ‘eccentric’, who performed ‘the maddest actions in the name of devotion’ to the emperor.\(^4\) Jansen has labeled them ‘revolutionaries without a program and followers in search of a leader’.\(^5\)

Yet the men who mutilated the statues did not come from the major domains, nor was their class background or ideological stance analogous to the samurai who ultimately engineered the Restoration.

Japanese historians have tended to explain the wave of assassinations that swept Kyoto in 1862–1863 in terms of the slogan sonnō jōi. Bitō Masahide and Tōyama Shigeki emphasize its Confucian roots in concepts of the proper relationship between name and function. The shogun’s full title, seii taishōgun 征夷大將軍, designated his function of suppressing barbarians, and as long as the emperor wished this to happen, it was his duty as a loyal subject to make it so. On a more general level, revering the emperor promoted national cohesion and manifested the kokutai 国体, the national essence or spirit, as immutable as heaven and earth; expelling the barbarians signified the need for national defense.\(^6\) When used by the Hirata disciples, the slogan transformed the nativist school from an apolitical opportunity for an aesthetic and spiritual awakening into a political movement, but in the process nationalism lost much of its potential as a cultural oppositional force to the feudal hierarchy.\(^7\) Nevertheless, despite the strong correlation between Confucian ideals as propounded


\(^5\) Jansen, p. 136.


\(^7\) Tōyama, pp. 69–70; Haga Noboru 芳賀登, Kokugaku no Hitobito: Sono Kōdō to Shisō 国学の人々: その行動と思想, Hyōronsha, 1975, pp. 5–6.
by the Mito school and late-Tokugawa nativism, Hirata nativism was not the focus of identity for the 1860s assassins or Restoration leaders.

In contrast, the men who pilloried the Ashikaga statues explicitly identified themselves with nativism and the Hirata school of nativism at that. The most powerful evocation of their frustrated attempts to play a significant role in the Restoration, and their disenchantment with the authoritarian Meiji state, may be found in Shimazaki Tōson’s 夜明け前 great novel about the Restoration, 

Yoake Mae 夜明け前. For these nativists, expelling the barbarian was not simply a matter of rectifying name and function, but of preserving Japan’s sacred soil from pollution; revering the emperor meant that everyone, including the shogun, was the emperor’s retainer. Unlike the Mito ideologue Aizawa Seishisai 会沢正志斎, who argued that taking the court seriously meant respecting the house of one’s master, that is, performing only those duties associated with one’s hereditarily assigned position in society, the nativists insisted that in an emergency everyone had the responsibility to serve the emperor regardless of the status distinctions between merchant and samurai, or samurai and daimyo. But just as the Ashikaga incident ended in futility with its perpetrators arrested and the rest of the Hirata disciples sidelined in the political arena, so too did
the nativist vision of an imperial restoration that would eliminate the gulf between bureaucrat and people.\textsuperscript{8}

I would not want to overemphasize the significance of an event that had little, if any, impact on the political settlement leading to the Restoration. But the incident can provide a perspective on the nativists overlooked in standard histories, samurai who did not come from the domains usually associated with restorationist activity and commoners who lacked any claim to political participation. From today’s vantage point, this movement seems doomed to failure, but at the time, it promoted a vision of a harmonious society that attracted adherents from all over the country. An analysis of how it brought its members together in the early months of 1863, how they communicated their ideas and the interplay of commentary on their deeds, can also lead to a better understanding of the expansion of public opinion before the Restoration. For this purpose, I draw on the work of Miyachi Masato and his suggestive analysis of the constitution of public opinion within the context of information networks developed by wealthy merchants and peasants at the end of the Tokugawa period.\textsuperscript{9} I will thus emphasize the connection between audience and actors, while examining first the nativists involved in the incident, then the pillory of the statues, and finally the debate it provoked.

\textit{The Hirata School}

Late-Tokugawa nativism was by no means homogeneous. The Hirata school is the best known, although even this group split into quarreling factions when Suzuki Shigetane 鈴木重胤, 1812–1863, accused Atsutane of being a mere book peddler, not a scholar.\textsuperscript{10} Another important figure was Ōkuni Takamasa 大國隆正, 1792–1871, who began his studies under Hirata’s tutelage and castigated Suzuki as a man of shallow understanding. But later Ōkuni struck out on his own, emphasizing respect for superiors and reverence for the emperor. A trip to Nagasaki in 1862 made him realize that Japan had to become wealthy before it could expel the barbarians, an attitude seen as entirely too passive by the Hirata disciples who gathered in Kyoto, and Ōkuni rejected the possibility of a politically oriented restoration along nativist lines.


\textsuperscript{10} Haga Noboru, Bakumatsu Kokugaku no Kenkyū 幕末国学の研究, Kyōiku Shuppan, 1980, p. 450. When Suzuki was assassinated in Edo on 1863.8.15, the poster left with the body said that he had falsified his writings, claiming that works written by Atsutane were written by himself and slandering his teacher’s other works by calling them trash. Suzuki Takazō 鈴木孝三 & Koike Shōtarō 小池章太郎, ed., Kinsei Shomin Seikatsu Shiryō: Fujio karaya Nikki 近世庶民生活史料: 植岡屋日記, San’ichi, 1991, 11, pp. 183–84.
On the other hand, Atsutane himself had called for a separation of nativism and politics. For him and his rural followers, the place where the ancient gods most actively manifested virtue was not Kyoto but the rural villages. In fact none of these men ever politicized what they did by calling it ‘national studies’ (kokugaku 国学): that term is a Meiji-period invention, along with ‘national literature’ (kokubungaku 国文学). Instead they used terms such as ‘imperial studies’ (kōgaku 皇学, or kōchōgaku 朝学), ‘studies of the ancient way’ (kodōgaku 古道学), or ‘basic teachings’ (honkyō 本教). Thus when the Hirata disciples decided to contribute their efforts to revering the emperor and expelling the barbarian, they had to redirect their cultural studies from the elucidation of ancient texts and the composition of poetry to the explanation of current affairs.

Miyachi attributes the Hirata school’s dominance in the nativist movement to Hirata Kanetane 平田鏡胤, 1799–1880, his determination to propagate his father-in-law’s teachings, and his remarkable organizational abilities. Atsutane had enrolled 553 disciples before his death in 1843; twenty years later, his posthumous disciples numbered no less than 1,330. In 1866, Kanetane wrote to a disciple in Mutsu, ‘Difficult though conditions are, the school continues to flourish. . . . I am delighted that all in all this promotes the great way of serving the emperor.’ Men and women who joined the Hirata school had to do more than simply sign an oath and pay a registration fee; they also had to accept Kanetane’s instruction, if necessary through what passed for correspondence courses. Kanetane’s letters to his disciples responded to their questions regarding Atsutane’s teachings; he also disseminated and received news pertaining to politics. This exchange of information increased the cohesion of the nativists as a group. In the Ina valley, for example, one of his proselytizers recruited some eighty disciples. This nativist cell passed around books and letters from Kanetane, held poetry meetings, and organized a project to publish Atsutane’s most important texts. Its members also corresponded directly with Hirata adherents in other regions, a horizontal connection that reinforced the disciples’ consciousness of belonging to a clearly definable school. When at the end of 1862 Kanetane received permission from his domain to collect information in Kyoto, his presence in the city encouraged the disciples to follow him in hopes of offering assistance in national affairs.

11 Haga, Kokugaku no Hitobito, p. 4. For an assessment of Ōkuni, see Harootunian, p. 297. Julia Adeney Thomas has pointed out the importance of place in her paper ‘Topographic Imaginations in Late-Tokugawa Japan’, read at the SSRC Rocky Mountain/Southwest Japan Seminar, Tucson, February 1993.


The nativists who plotted the character assassination of the Ashikaga shoguns were a motley crew of ronin, shrine priests, and commoners from both eastern and western Japan, of all ages between twenty and fifty. What brought them together was their common affiliation with the Hirata school that overcame domainal boundaries and status distinctions. It was the nativist tie, for example, that led Noro Kyūzaemon 野呂久左衛門, 1829–1883, an Okayama rear vassal with a stipend of 150 koku, to share quarters with Nishikawa Yoshisuke 西川吉輔, 1816–1880, a fertilizer merchant from Ōmi. Also roaming together in Kyoto were two samurai from a branch of the Tottori domain, a samurai from Aizu, a rural entrepreneur from Shimōsa, a doctor’s son from Edo, and a shrine priest’s son from Iyo. They were later joined by rural entrepreneurs with honorary samurai status from Hitachi and Shimōsa, as well as a peasant from Shinano whose skill in sword fighting had led to his adoption by a low-ranking bakufu retainer. Other nativists implicated in the incident included samurai from Shimabara and Tokushima, and several merchants. None of them was from the domains of Mito, Satsuma, Tosa, and Chōshū that figure so prominently in the histories of the Restoration. While some had absconded from their domains and all aspired to be loyalists (shishi 志士), I will distinguish them from other political activists by referring to them as Hirata disciples or nativists, keeping in mind that not all nativists belonged to the Hirata school.

One Hirata disciple who figures prominently in Yoake Mae and who, according to some accounts, instigated the Ashikaga incident was Tsunoda Tadayuki 角田忠行, 1834–1918. 15 The men in his family were the hereditary shrine priests of the Chikatsu Shrine in the Iwamurada domain in Shinano and claimed descent from the eighth emperor Kögen 孝元. Tsunoda was twenty years old when Perry arrived in Japan, and the event coincided with his first reading of Taiheiki 太平記, a text highly critical of the Ashikaga shoguns. According to one hagiographer, he was immediately struck by the importance of revering the emperor and expelling the barbarians, an epiphany he expressed in a poem:

In 1855 he deserted his domain to enroll in the Edo school run by the Mito ideologue Fujita Tōko 藤田東湖, just before Fujita died in an earthquake in that same year. Tsunoda then switched his allegiance to Hirata Kanetane. At the Hirata school he met some men with whom he would later associate in Kyoto, as well as other martyrs to the Restoration cause such as Hirano Kuniomi 平野國臣, 1828–1864. There too he learned of the assassination of Ii Naosuke 井伊直弼, the shogun’s chief advisor, in 1860. He rushed to the site, but all traces had been removed, so he gathered information from everyone he could and praised the assassins in poetry:

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miyoshino no
miya ni tsukushite
omi tachi wa
yo no mamebito no
kagami narikeri
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sakurada ni
hana tomo chiri ni shi
mononofu no
na wa yorozuyo ni
kaguwashiku koso
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He collected eyewitness reports and wrote more poems following the attempted assassination of Andō Nobumasa 安藤信正 in 1862.

Poetry figured prominently in Tsunoda’s writings. Haga Noboru has pointed out that the nativists believed fervently in kotodama 言霊—the magical power or essence of words, the necessity to talk the world into existence through poetry. Without considering their poetical laments, he believes, we cannot understand their psychology. Many Hirata disciples compiled poetry collections in which compositions on the ancient themes of love and seasonal change mingled with patriotic doggerel. They shared a conception of poetry as the repository of a person’s deepest thoughts and strongest emotions with the other loyalists in Kyoto; but whereas someone such as the Chōshū samurai and political strategist Kusaka Genzui 久坂元瑞 relied chiefly on Chinese poetry as his medium of expression, the nativists tended more toward traditional Japanese waka. Thus poetry that had once circulated chiefly in the literary public sphere became a medium for making statements to be shared with like-minded individuals in a public space that was becoming increasingly politicized.

Tsunoda directed most of his writing, prose and poetry alike, to his nativist

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16 Tanaka Zen’ichi, p. 95. The southern court made its headquarters at Yoshino following the defeat of Kusunoki Masashige 楠木正成 by Ashikaga Takauji 足利尊氏 at Minatogawa in 1336.

17 Tsunoda Tadayuki oden, p. 15

18 Haga, Kokugaku no Hitobito, p. 272, and Haga, Bakumatsu Kokugaku, p. 473.
audience. In Kyoto in early 1862 he crafted an easy-to-read summary of the first chapters of *Kojiki* 古事記 titled *Koshirayaku* 古史略 and dedicated it to the brave warriors (masurao 勇荒男) who defended the emperor. Intended as a text for beginning students, it covered the seven generations of gods down to the death of Emperor Jimmu 神武 in such a way as to emphasize the obligations of all Japanese to the gods, the blessings received from the emperor, and the importance of respecting the national essence. Tsunoda hoped that the work would be entrusted to people loyal to the gods, the emperor, and the state (kok-ka 国家) to help them and others obtain a deeper understanding of the Way. Indeed, it established his reputation among the Hirata school adherents, where it received much credit for strengthening their dedication to the loyalist cause.19

While in Kyoto Tsunoda’s nativist connections brought him introductions to a number of local merchants later implicated in the Ashikaga incident. These men had both intellectual and economic ties to each other. Nishikawa Yoshisuke at one time had a thriving business in cotton cloth as well as marketing fish-meal fertilizer from Hokkaido. The textile trade connected him with Komuro Shinobu 小室信夫, 1839–1899, born to a branch family of Yamakeya, weaving operators in a Tango village, who had put Shinobu in charge of their Kyoto operations. What turned him into an activist was the rise in the price of thread brought about by foreign trade through Yokohama, making life difficult for the weavers in the Nishijin district of Kyoto. Having experienced the effects of foreign trade at first hand, he was vehemently opposed to opening another port at Hyōgo. He was recruited into the Hirata school by another cloth merchant, Nagao Ikusaburō 長尾郁三郎, 1837–1864, who had studied nativism with Ōkuni Takamasa, then went to Edo, where he enrolled in Hirata Kanetane’s school before returning to Kyoto. Said to have been a handsome youth with refined features, high-spirited, and impetuous, Nagao, like Komuro, worked in the family store by day, then at night strapped on two swords and joined the loyalists.20

The oldest Hirata disciple implicated in beheading the statues was Matsuo Taseko 松尾多勢子, 1811–1894, a rural entrepreneur from the Ina valley in Shinano. Her biography provides a particularly clear case of how intellectual interests both duplicated and superseded economic connections in the construction of a public space where people from diverse backgrounds came together to study poetry and debate political issues. She received some education from her cousin before she married, then she continued to study poetry while running the family sake-brewing and textile business in place of her invalid


20 Haga, *Bakumatsu Kokugaku*, pp. 461–62. Following the Restoration, Komuro visited the West; in 1874 he wrote a large part of the memorial for the establishment of a representative assembly presented by himself, Itagaki Taisuke, and five others to the emperor. He also participated in the building of the Osaka railroad and the Hokkaido transportation company. His son, Komuro Shinsuke 小室信介, was active in the popular rights movement as a journalist.
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husband. She too objected to the rise in the price of silk thread after Japan signed commercial treaties with eleven nations in the First Month 1862 and wrote a long poem to that effect. Even before then she had joined the Hirata school cell centered on Iida. At the end of 1862, using her poetic studies as an excuse, she decided to go to Kyoto. As she wrote at the beginning of her diary, ‘I resolved to make a pilgrimage to the capital to fulfill my desires,’ and she composed a poem:

chihayaburu
kami ni inorite
tabi goromo
kaeri komu hi wo
chigiri tsutsu yuku21

I go on my way
In my traveling clothes,
Promising in my prayers
To the myriad gods
To return one day.

Her traveling companion was a clerk from Iseya, a store in Kyoto run by Ikemura Kyūbei 池村久兵衛. Ikemura had long-standing business relations with the rural entrepreneurs from the Kiso and Ina valleys, but he was also a nativist who introduced Taseko to poetry specialists among the court nobility and nativists among the Chōshū and Satsuma samurai. Another acquaintance was Fukuba Bisei 福羽美静, 1831–1907, a samurai from Tsuwano who later lectured to the Meiji emperor on Kojiki. By the time her spiritual leader Hirata Kane-tane had arrived in Kyoto, she had numerous connections among his disciples. With these men she imbibed the atmosphere of Kyoto while lamenting the state of national affairs.22

Information networks, developed in the course of their business and intellectual enterprises, prepared the way for many nativists to come to Kyoto and for sustained communication between eastern and western Japan. This can be seen with particular clarity in the history of Miyawada Mitsutane 宮和田光胤 and his son Tanekage 風景, b. 1840. Miyawada was born in 1816 to the headman/daimyo innkeeper family of Miyawada village in Shimōsa. He supported some Mito samurai so lavishly that he brought about the decline in his family’s fortune, but in return they brought him news of the forced retirement of Tokugawa Nariaki 徳川斎昭, lord of Mito, and the imprisonment of Fujita Tōko in 1844. A quarrel with some samurai officials gave him and Tanekage an excuse to go to Edo to learn sword-fighting. Once Miyawada perfected his technique, he opened his own school and traveled through Kantō promoting it. Then an old family friend introduced him and his son to the Hirata school of nativism.23 Both were determined to take action on behalf of the em-

23 This was Morooka Masatane. His daughter, Chiyo 千代, well educated in the traditional arts and foreign languages, married Kōtoku Shūsui 寶徳秋水 in 1899, a marriage that was by all accounts extremely unhappy for both. F. G. Notehelfer, Kōtoku Shūsui: Portrait of a Japanese Radical, Cambridge U.P., 1971, pp. 47-54.
peror, but Tanekage convinced his father that he, the son, should go to Kyoto, and there he was swept up in the plot to pillory the statues. Following his arrest, Miyawada received reports from four different sources regarding the fate of his son: one came through his martial arts school, one from the messenger service that he relied on to send letters to Kyoto, one from the Hirata school, and one from a merchant acquaintance in Kyoto. After the shogun returned his authority to the emperor, Miyawada used his nativist connections to get his son released from confinement. Throughout his life Miyawada collected reports and rumors on the political issues of the time, and debated with his friends on how these should be interpreted and what should be done. But he was never able to take effective action himself, and he ended his life as a priest at one of the small shrines at the Fukagawa Hachiman-gū in Tokyo, much like Aoyama Hanzō 青山半蔵 in Yoake Mae.24

Participation in the Hirata school brought the western merchants and samurai into contact with disciples from eastern Japan in a rare blurring of regional loyalties. Conrad Totman has attributed some of the most bitter fighting following the fall of the bakufu to ‘long-smoldering regional tension between northeast and southwest’, first brought to the fore when Chôshū and Aizu troops fought for control of Kyoto in 1864.25 This same regional antagonism was displayed when samurai and shrine priests from western Japan petitioned for the pardon of the Ashikaga incident perpetrators, only to be rebuked by Matsudaira Katamori 松平容保, Aizu daimyo and the recently appointed military governor of Kyoto. In contrast, the nativists found a common ground, not in economic relations, although these certainly bound some members of the group, not in past experiences either as low-ranking samurai or honorary samurai/rural entrepreneurs, but in the training they received from Hirata Kanetane in the study of ancient texts, the belief in the gods’ sustained interest in human affairs, and the practice of poetry. For some, their identification with this school led to the decision that revering the emperor at a time of national crisis required acting politically.26 In this way cultural practices developed in a private sphere, explicitly defined as apolitical by their spiritual leader Hirata Atsutane, became transformed into a set of critical public opinions that implied the expansion of political public space across regional lines, at least for nativists if not for domain loyalists. This space had been prepared by the construction of information networks based on correspondence and travel between the nativists in Kantô and Kinai, and it became the site of action when the nativists gathered in Kyoto at the end of 1862.

26 Harootunian has noted that ‘a cursory examination of the social organization of the [tenchû groups] strongly suggests that they recruited supporters from different regions of the country and status groupings (varying degrees of samurai, wealthy peasants, rural money-lenders, lower-ranking courtiers); and that they emphasized camaraderie, which had little in common with the rigid behavioral expectations of the vertical loyalty system in the domains.’ Toward Restoration, p. 252.
Terrorist Plots and Decapitated Statues

In choosing events to include in a narrative of how the Hirata disciples came to gather in Kyoto, then decide to pillory the heads of the Ashikaga shoguns’ statues, I have focused less on bakufu policy decisions, about which they knew little, and more on events that resonated with people in the streets, who made up the audience for murder and character assassination alike. For these people, the center of political activity began to shift to Kyoto following the assassination of Ii Naosuke in 1860. Shogunal advisors implemented a series of strategies designed to use the court’s prestige to support the bakufu’s waning reputation, including marrying Emperor Kōmei’s younger sister, Kazunomiya 和宮, to the shogun in 1861. Imperial loyalists of varying ideological stripes tried to find ways to assist in national affairs, and news of their activities summoned more would-be activists to the city. Loyalist action sometimes took the form of assassinating men deemed traitors because they had either fingered loyalists for arrest and execution or vacillated over proposals to expel the barbarians. The assassins, mainly ronin from Satsuma, Chōshū, and Tosa, publicized their rationale for murder as widely as possible in order to intimidate their opponents, justify their actions, and heighten public support for the loyalist cause. Although the Hirata disciples did not imitate them directly, the deeds done by these ronin provided the context within which they acted.

The news of shogun Iemochi’s marriage to Kazunomiya ran like a shock wave through the nativist cells. First proposed by Ii Naosuke as a way of using the emperor’s prestige to reassert bakufu authority following the debacle of the court’s rejection of the 1858 commercial treaty between Japan and the U.S., the marriage was in turn supported by a faction of nobles who believed it would give the court some leverage over the bakufu. Rumors flew that the emperor was not happy at the marriage, low-ranking nobles had accepted bribes to promote it, and Kazunomiya would become a hostage to whatever the bakufu decided to do in the future. For the nativists, the marriage symbolized everything that the bakufu was doing wrong, because by ignoring the one condition the court attached to the marriage, that the treaties be abrogated and the barbarians expelled, it demonstrated the shogun’s contempt for the emperor. In the words of a Hirata disciple, ‘This trick by bakufu servants to deceive the court will lead to a decline in the court’s prestige. It offers an insult to all retainers.’ Intimidation by loyalists finally forced the faction that

27 Some merchants who habitually used the road taken by her entourage commented on the inconvenience caused when they and their goods were forced to make way for her. Satō Shigerō 佐藤誠朗, Bakumatsu Ishin no Minshū no Sekai 幕末維新の民衆の世界, Iwanami, 1994, p. 44. In his report to the Akita authorities, Kanetane included a letter from Iwasaki Nagayo in Iida describing the hardships suffered by the men mobilized to carry her baggage. Miyachi, ‘Bakumatsu Hirata Kokugaku’, p. 243.

28 Hirata Kanetane, ‘Fūun Himitsu Tantei Roku’ 風雲秘密探偵録, 1. Manuscript at the Shirō Hensanjo. A letter from his disciple Iwasaki Nagayo at the end of this volume reported: ‘People in Nakatsugawa are saying that this marriage will dim the imperial prestige, and we hate to speculate on how the princess must feel.’
had supported the marriage into hiding. Nakayama Tadayasu 中山忠能, 1809–1888, maternal grandfather of the Meiji emperor and father of the radical Tadamitsu 忠光, assassinated in 1864 by bakufu loyalists, characterized those who threatened the nobles as follows: ‘They are not warriors from Chōshū or Satsuma, but a mob of vagabonds, wholesalers in loyalism. They live from day to day claiming to serve the emperor, gradually infecting more and more people.’29

The complicated political situation in Kyoto drew political activists of many statues to the city. When Shimazu Hisamitsu 島津久光, de facto daimyo of Satsuma, arrived in the Fourth Month 1862, he had more than one thousand troops with him, as also did the Chōshū heir in the Sixth Month. The retired Tosa daimyo, Yamanouchi Yōdō 山内容堂, appeared in Fushimi in the Fourth Month, and according to the diary kept by a Kyoto pawnbroker, ‘Rumor has it that everyone from Kyushu and Shikoku is coming to Kyoto.’30 These rumors attracted many Hirata disciples. Tsunoda Tadayuki attached himself to Hirata Kanetane and his son on their trips to Kyoto in 1862 to collect information on the political situation at the behest of the Akita domain.31 Other Hirata disciples also came to the city, some in the company of Kanetane, others when they learned he was there, others even before he arrived. Nishikawa Yoshisuke, the merchant from Ōmi, went at the invitation of Chōshū samurai whom he had met through his wide-ranging circle of correspondents.32 The village head and teacher of swordsmanship, Miyawada Mitsutane, had planned to go to Kyoto in the retinue of Ōbara Shigetomi 大原重徳 when Ōbara finished his delivery of the emperor’s demand for the expulsion of the barbarians in 1862, but his son Tanekage insisted on going in his place because,

At present all the officials in the Tokugawa bakufu despise the court and act in ways contrary to court orders. This is not a time when those of us born in Japan can sit in comfort idly eating our food. We know that day by day imperial loyalists are gathering in Kyoto. I [and my friends] have resolved to go there together and mingle with the men of high purpose from all over the country.33

32 Nishikawa Tajirō 西川太治郎, Nishikawa Yoshisuke, Ōmi Shinhoshia, Ōtsu, 1904, pp. 37 & 60.
33 Asai, ‘Ashikaga Shōgun’, p. 314. At Tanekage’s departure for Kyoto, he and his father exchanged poems that emphasized the commonality of their goals. Asserting his claim to imperial descent by calling himself Taira no Mitsutane, the father wrote: ‘May the gods protect / These hearts ready to render service, / One the father, one the son, / One on the road to the capital, / The other under eastern clouds.’ See Asai, pp. 301–32 for a biography of Mitsutane. Here I have used Thomas Huber’s translation of shishi in his ‘Men of High Purpose’, pp. 107–27.
While the nativists who are the subject of the present article were trickling into the city, ronin from Satsuma and Tosa took direct action against the men perceived as enemies of the court. The assassinations began on 1862.7.23 with the murder of Shimada Sakon 島田左近, a retainer of the Kujō imperial regent, who was accused of talking his master into supporting the 1858 commercial treaty with the U.S., helping Ii Naosuke's confidant, Nagano Shuzen 長野主膳, expose the men purged in 1859, and promoting the Kazunomiya marriage. When his head was displayed on the riverbank at Shijō Bridge, a traveling merchant from Ōmi went to see it and carefully copied the inscription: ‘This man is just as great a traitor as Nagano Shuzen. He is a villain who has plotted traitorous deeds and ought not to be permitted to remain on earth.’ The diarist
commented, ‘Since this was the first time that the head of someone so important had been cut off and exhibited in broad daylight, swarms of people flocked to see it.’

A Kyoto pawnbroker also copied the inscription and drew a picture of the head with the signboard below it.

Other assassinations by samurai loyalists followed quickly. A month later, the head of Homma Seiichirō, a ronin from Echigo, ended up at the same spot with a sign stating...

34 Satō Shigeru, Omi Shōnin Bakumatsu Ishin Kenbunroku 近江商人幕末維新見聞録, San-seidō, 1990, p. 20. His name was Kosugi Motozō 小杉元蔵. Nagano Shuzen was a peripatetic instructor of Norinaga’s teachings who traveled through Mikawa, Owari, and Mino before settling in Omi. There he came to the attention of Ii, who made him a Hikone domain retainer and employed him in Kyoto as a liaison with the nobility. Following Ii’s assassination and the change in Hikone domain policy, Shuzen was executed on 1862.10.16. On 11.15 his mistress was tied up at Sanjō Bridge with a placard announcing that she had ‘assisted him in his corrupt plots since 1858, doing rare and unusual deeds. Even though what she did was unforgivable, she is not sentenced to death because she is a woman.’ Uchida & Shimano, p. 185. A detailed account of these assassinations is found in Ernest Mason Satow, tr., Japan 1853–1864 or Genji Yume Monogatari, Nagai Shuppan Kyōkai, 1905, pp. 55, 62–64, & 73. The author, Baba Bun’ei 馬場文英, lived in Kyoto.

35 Uchida & Shimano, p. 176. Five days later, a poster was left at the Tenjin Shrine in Kyoto. It said, ‘On 7.20 the king of Heaven borrowed the strength of the brave warriors who are loyal to the nation to attack the great traitor and villain Shimada and have him pilloried. All who see this clap their hands with joy and delight.’ Kobayashi Masaakira 小林正彰, Nishikawa Yoshisuke, Ōmi Hachiman, 1971, p. 99.
He deceived the people with false statements, he became familiar with the high nobility, he used his clever tongue to make slick proposals to the three domains of Satsuma, Chōshū, and Tosa, he divided the men of high purpose, he concocted various plots, and he expropriated goods unreasonably. Words cannot express all the other wicked and perverted things he did.  

In fact Homma was a loyalist who realized early the need for concerted action to bring down the bakufu, but his words of caution had led to his being branded a traitor. For men in the street, however, these nuances were lost. They simply copied the inscriptions that accompanied the heads and made drawings for future reference. The Hirata disciples were delighted with the assassinations. One of them wrote in his diary, 'The appearance of loyal retainers has made this a world of great happiness.'

Assassinations soon became a regular occurrence. On the day after the Homma assassination, Ugō Shigekuni, general factotum for the Kujō imperial regent, 'received the punishment of Heaven' for having committed the same crimes as Shimada. A week later the bakufu police spy Bunkichi was strangled. At the end of the Ninth Month at least thirty men had killed three bakufu policemen accused of having 'copied the treasonous deeds of Nagano Shuzen and Shimada Sakon.' Their heads were left at the entrance to Kyoto, along with a sign calling for an official investigation into similar crimes, otherwise Heaven would take vengeance. In the Tenth Month, porters for Kazunomiya's journey to Edo met with the vengeance of Heaven when two were tied up and exposed alive for having extorted money along the road. The traveling merchant from Ōmi entirely approved:

People like them are really robbers of the country and it would not be amiss if several hundred of them were killed. . . . People who carefully investigate the crimes that such men have committed and punish them in this fashion demonstrate sincerity and loyalty to the nation.  

An important element in each assassination, then, was the polemical statement displayed with the head, to be read, copied, discussed by people in Kyoto, and, if need be, dispatched to the provinces. Ordered by his superiors in the Sendai domain to collect information, Tamamushi Sadaïyû, 1823–1869, for example, drew on public and private records to compile an account of the period from 1862 to 1864. For the assassination of Shimada

37 Haga, Kokugaku no Hitobito, p. 444.  
38 Uchida & Shimano, p. 180. Later, on 11.16, yet another reputed associate of Nagano, Tada Tatewaki, was assassinated. 'Now that it is time for men of red hearts who grieve for their country to cleanse the soil, his crimes should not be permitted in heaven or on earth,' p. 186.  
39 Satō, Ōmi Shōnin, p. 21. The Kyoto pawnbroker's diary reports the assassination of porters on 10.11, a report confirmed by one other source, but it is not clear whether Chōjirō actually bothered to verify his information and he made no comment on it. Uchida & Shimano, p. 184; Shimo Ina Gunshi, pp. 82–83.
Sakon, he relied on a letter from his teacher in Kyoto. Other members of the audience took similar advantage of the opportunity to expand political space by writing down everything they knew or guessed about each incident. It has often been remarked that the aim of assassinating a servant such as Shimada was to intimidate his master, that is to say, the assassins were trying to stage a dialogue with their superiors. But it is also clear that the audience for the dialogue included nativists, pawnbrokers, and traveling merchants.

While assassins continued their terrorist tactics, other loyalists posted manifests. On 1862.9.12, samurai from Tosa threw a statement into Iwakura Tomomi’s 岩倉具視 official residence accusing him of having impared imperial authority by promoting Kazunomiya’s marriage, ‘a humiliation unheard of since ancient times’. The vengeance of Heaven ought to have visited him, but he had been spared out of respect for the court. Nevertheless, should he linger in the capital any longer, his head would be exposed at Nijō Bridge. The other three nobles associated with the Kazunomiya marriage received similar messages. Iwakura prudently fled the capital and spent the following few years in hiding. On 1863.1.6 a manifesto threatening the assassination of Date Munenari 伊達宗宗, daimyo of Uwajima and a firm supporter of the status quo, appeared on a gate in the middle of the city. ‘Even though he came to Kyoto claiming to serve as the emperor’s shield, he has done nothing but disobey the emperor’s orders. . . . If he does not quickly reform his ways and apologize for his crimes, we will attack his inn and make of him a blood festival for the expulsion of the barbarians.’ Once again these threats found a wider circulation in the records of residents in the city.

The use of terrorist tactics to intimidate men in decision-making positions and to publicize statements demanding the expulsion of the barbarians continued in 1863. Early that year, Kagawa Hajime 賀川肇 and Ikeuchi Daigaku 池内大学 were killed. Ikeuchi’s ears were cut off and sent to the two nobles in charge of bakufu liaison, with a respectful letter pointing out that the two men had received bribes to acquiesce to bakufu demands and to issue imperial decrees on their own, actions that made light of imperial authority. ‘We humbly think that you should reform your hearts and within three days resign your positions. . . . If you do not, what happened to these ears will happen again.’ The men thus threatened duly resigned their posts. A copy of the letter ended up on a signboard on the west side of Shijō Bridge and people gathered to read it. Kagawa’s head was placed on a drum stand in front of the temple where

41 Iwakura-Kō Jikki 岩倉公記, Iwakura-Kō Kyūsei Hozonkai, 1903, 1, p. 655.
Hitotsubashi Keiki — 橋慶喜, soon to become the fifteenth and last Tokugawa shogun, was staying. This was because the daimyo had allegedly temporized as regards the expulsion of the barbarians.\(^4^4\) Kagawa’s arms were cut off and sent to the Iwakura and Chigusa compounds as a warning to the two nobles not to allow themselves to be reinstated at court. This use of parts of the body amazed the townspeople. The Ōmi traveling merchant commented that since the previous winter at least thirty men had been killed, but no one knew who was doing these deeds, the authorities never arrested anyone, and furthermore they did not remove the heads and bodies, but allowed them to remain as they were. It did not make sense.\(^4^5\)

These assassinations and the commentary that they generated made up one context for the decapitation of the Ashikaga statues. Certainly the use of body parts to attract attention to polemical statements must have served as a model.

\(^{4^4}\) Satow, p. 73. The manifesto accompanying the head ran: ‘At the present time you are supposed to be expelling the barbarians and it is inexcusable that you are not opposing them. Instead you dicker for time in your negotiations with the cabinet council, using whatever makeshift excuses you can. Everyone suspects that in fact you are paying only lip service to expelling the barbarians, whereas in reality you want to persuade the court to open the ports and institute trade. . . . Our plea is that you make it your urgent business to become in truth what you are supposed to be, decide on a date for expulsion as soon as possible, and take measures to dispel the doubts that everyone in the realm now holds. Although this head is extremely unsightly, we present it for your viewing pleasure as a token of the blood festival for expelling the barbarians.’ Yoshida Tsunekichi 吉田常吉 & Satō Seizaburō 佐藤誠三郎, ed., Bakumatsu Seiji Ronshū 暮末政治論叢, Nihon Shisō Taikei 56, Iwanami, 1976, p. 291.

\(^{4^5}\) Satō, Ōmi Shōnin, p. 22.
But because I want to argue that the perpetrators of the Ashikaga incident had a more generalized ideological goal in mind and did not attack particular individuals per se, it is also important to consider the audience. The bakufu had earlier relaxed the requirements for the length of time the daimyo were expected to remain in Edo so that they might use the money thus saved to build coastal defenses. A number of them, however, took advantage of the opportunity to travel to Kyoto, whether summoned by their in-laws among the court nobility or simply on their own initiative when a shogunal visit to the city was first proposed. By the Second Month 1863, a Kyoto pawnbroker counted nineteen daimyo who had arrived in the city, each with retinues of unruly retainers, and the city’s population rose from 300,000 to 500,000.46 The shogun himself was expected in the capital in the first part of the Third Month.

None of the Hirata disciples involved in decapitating the Ashikaga statues had participated in any of the previous assassinations or threats against the nobility and daimyo. They had come to Kyoto to assist in national affairs—but what kind of assistance could they offer? Lacking the numbers and support systems enjoyed by the ronin assassins, they had few means at their disposal to make an impact on the political process. According to Matsuo Taseko, the oldest of the disciples, they often gathered to discuss current affairs, meetings that sometimes ended in tears of frustration because the foreigners continued to encroach in Japan, yet men in positions of power and responsibility did nothing to stop them. They spent a great deal of time at famous scenic sites, such as Arashiyama, where they wrote poems in praise of the gods that expressed their emotional attachment to the ancient capital. Given the heightened excitement of a city swarming with samurai yet no indication from the bakufu as to when the barbarians were to be expelled, however, tensions ran high.47 At the same time, it was evident that manifestos posted in the Kyoto streets received widespread attention. Miyachi Masato has emphasized that expansion of public opinion at the end of the Tokugawa period developed out of networks in which an amorphous group, ill-defined by the status distinctions and economic arrangements of the time, exchanged and later commented on information regarding political events.48 Drawing on his argument, it is possible to conclude that the pillory of the Ashikaga statues took advantage of the only weapon in the nativist arsenal, that of propaganda. It was both an expression of public opinion and an attempt to influence others, that is, an example of public opinion in the making.

47 Recollections composed in late Meiji recorded how the Hirata disciples often came close to blows when discussing issues and strategies, disputes that had to be mediated by Taseko. Shimo Ina Gunshi, p. 96. Watanabe Gempō said that the incident arose out of frustration at those who refused to clarify name and function. ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shiryō Kōhon’ 大日本維新史料総合, section 2, volume 32, p. 123, manuscript in the Shiryō Hensanjo.
The nativists’ choice of the Ashikaga statues as the vehicle for their contribution to public opinion arose partly from the accessibility of the statues, but mostly from their interpretation of the past and its relevance for the present. The Ashikaga shoguns have long been vilified in Japanese history. Tōyama Shigeki has pointed out that the history of Japan produced by the Mito school (Dai Nihonshi 大日本史) labeled Ashikaga Takauji a traitor for having opposed Emperor Go-Daigo 後醍醐; it shows no regard for why he did either in terms of the historical circumstances or his own motives.49 The nativists shared the Mito assessment and a favorite text was Taiheiki, the classical military tale that made a hero of Kusunoki Masashige 楠木正成 and castigated Takauji. As Morooka Masatane, the son of an Edo doctor, wrote in a long poem while imprisoned following the incident,

Takauji, you and your disgusting son betrayed the emperor and tormented the princes. You are unparalleled traitors to the country. The mad and treacherous Yoshimitsu is a criminal who went begging to the king of China, demeaning himself to become the king’s retainer, and polluted the divine country.50

The nativists were not the only loyalists in Kyoto who wanted to take a delayed revenge on the Ashikaga shoguns. For the men anxious to rectify the relations between emperor and subject, all traitors, past and present, should be purged. A political satire titled Bunkyū Ninen Natsu Shin-Kyōgen Chūshingura Serifu 文久二年夏新狂言忠臣藏せりふ (‘Summer 1862: The Script for a New Comic Version of “The Treasury of Loyal Retainers”’) contained the line, ‘The masterless samurai from the domains undertake an attack against the Ashikaga.’ Tanaka Mitsuaki 田中光顕, 1843–1939, a Tosa samurai then in Kyoto, said later, ‘Once the idea of heavenly vengeance became popular, we felt we had to do something, we couldn’t just sit around; but it wasn’t that easy to find someone to kill.’ For him and his friends, decapitating the statues represented the assassination of traitors in another mode. But when they arrived at the temple, they were astonished to find that another group of men had been there before them. ‘The statement that they posted with the heads demonstrated what the loyalists of the time were thinking.’51 In other words, it indeed captured a segment of public opinion.

Exactly who among the Hirata disciples was responsible for the deed and how it happened is by no means clear. According to Matsuo Taseko’s diary, some disciples met on 2.13 and ‘wooden heads’ were discussed, a notation that suggests that the incident was planned well in advance.52 Recollections compiled after the event make it appear much more spontaneous. According to Miwada Mototsuna 三輪田元嗣, a shrine priest’s son from Iyo, ‘We were already enraged by the bakufu’s arbitrary rule. . . . On the night of the 21st, Takamatsu Heijūrō 高松平十郎 suggested, “One way to admonish the bakufu

49 Tōyama, p. 71.
50 Quoted in Haga, Bakumatsu Kokugaku, pp. 468–69.
52 Ichimura, Tabi no Nagusa, p. 38.
The heads of the three Ashikaga statues. *Fūsetsushū.*

for its crimes would be to make the Ashikaga disloyalty a matter of public debate."  

Tsunoda Tadayuki, the erstwhile shrine priest from Shinano, gave two versions of the event. One that found its way into *Yoake Mae* claimed that Miwada had done the planning. Another, that he kept secret until 1896, mentioned that he had learned of the statues’ existence because Hirata Kanetane had rented a house in Omuro, right next to Tōji-in. He visited the temple on the 19th to view the statues, but the priest wanted 200 mon to pull back the curtain. In a rage Tsunoda shouted, ‘Why should I have to pay to see the disgusting statues of traitors?’

Nine Hirata disciples made up the group that attacked Tōji-in. While two stood watch at the middle gate, Tsunoda and six others invaded the hall where the statues were enshrined. Someone suggested that the statues be destroyed, but because the images were depicted in full court dress, the other men did not want to show such disrespect to the emperor; in fact, they even removed the tall black hats signifying court rank and title before pulling off the heads and

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55 *Shimo Ina Gunshi,* p. 116; Sakamoto, *Meiji Ishin,* p. 256; Nishikawa, p. 19. Tadayuki wrote his account a year later while still in hiding. In 1896 he was willing to send a copy to his old friend Noshiro Hirosuke with a warning that it must not be shown to others. Tanijima Kazuma 谷島一馬, ‘*Noshiro Hirosuke Kankei Shiryōshū*’ 能代広助関係史料集, in *Ichihara Chihōshi Kenkyū* 市原地方史研究, 16, 1990, pp. 34–37.
gouging out the eyes.\textsuperscript{56} Outside the temple the young Kyoto merchant Nagao Ikusaburō led them in a series of war cries, then they carried the three heads to the house rented by the Ōmi merchant Nishikawa and the Okayama rear vassal Noro, where a stand had been prepared for them. Some weeks later, during the interrogation following the incident, Noro said that he and Nishikawa knew nothing of what was happening until these men, who were mere acquaintances, showed up at their door. Once the deed was done, however, they went along with it to show their opposition to bakufu policy.\textsuperscript{57}

Writing a manifesto was as important as displaying the statues’ heads. Ōba Kyōhei 大庭恭平, 1830–1902, an Aizu retainer, wrote the label for each head, giving its posthumous Buddhist name and given name. At Tsunoda’s direction, he changed the character for \textit{taka} in Takuji’s name from 尊, ‘respect’, to 高, ‘tall’, since, as Tsunoda declared, Takuji had not shown respect for the emperor. A placard posted in front of the heads announced, ‘It is now appropriate to clarify names and functions. All the disloyal retainers since the Kamakura period ought to be investigated one by one and punished as they deserve. Since these three traitors did the worst evil, their vile statues have

\textsuperscript{56} Tanaka Zen’ichi, p. 97.

\textsuperscript{57} Nishikawa, p. 10. For narratives of this event in English, see Shimazaki, \textit{Before the Dawn}, pp. 175–77, and Satow, pp. 77–79. A statue of Tokugawa Ieyasu is also enshrined in Tōji-in, and according to some accounts, Nagao proposed that the next time the nativists should decapitate this statue as well.
been visited with the vengeance of Heaven.’ In a mock formal style, the sign went on to say, ‘These heads are to remain exposed for three days. Anyone removing them will certainly be punished.’

Not content with this brief explanation, the former village headman Miyawada wrote another manifesto posted next to the official noticeboard at the end of Sanjō Bridge. In it he impeached not just the Ashikaga shoguns but the entire system of military rule, beginning with the Kamakura bakufu, ‘when that traitor Yoritomo distressed the court.’ The succeeding shoguns continued to commit the crime of allowing disorder to flourish, a trend corrected only when Oda Nobunaga pacified the country. Still, the tradition of disloyalty bequeathed by the Ashikaga was never effectively ended, primarily because the early Ashikaga shoguns were never called to account for their deeds. Now, however, the tide of fortune was approaching in which long-standing evils would be swept away and correct government would be restored [fukko isshin 復古一新],’ making it imperative to ‘punish the grave crimes of these vile traitors’. Naturally enough, the object was not simply to rectify the wrongs of the past but to serve as a warning for the present.

Today many people clearly surpass these traitors. . . . If they do not immediately repent these ancient evils and offer loyal service to expunge the evil customs existing since the Kamakura period and offer their assistance to the court, . . . then all the loyalists on earth will rise up together and punish them for their crimes.

Unlike the earlier manifestos that ignored the history of military rule in Japan and concentrated solely on specific deeds done by individuals, this statement presented a sweeping attack on the tradition of shogunal administration. The text makes clear the nativist understanding that the military rulers had usurped power in a way that signified a strong criticism of the social order. It is, nevertheless, ambiguous regarding political arrangements in the present. Insofar as it called for the administrators to reform themselves rather than repudiating their roles entirely, it cannot be considered a call for revolution and an end of military rule. In other words, it did not demand that the shogun step down, only that he behave in the way his office required that he behave, that is, to show respect for the emperor’s wishes by expelling the barbarians.

Public response to this incident was gratifyingly immediate. The Kyoto pawnbroker must have visited the site since, in addition to a copy of the manifesto, his diary includes a drawing of the scene. Even as far away as the

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58 This text appears in numerous places. An easy-to-find annotated version is in Yoshiida & Satō, p. 292.
59 Yoshiida & Satō, p. 293.
60 Uchida & Shimano, p. 194. A number of fūsetsu tome, or records of correspondence, included drawings of the heads, some in elaborate color. Miyachi Masato has a collection of five drawings of the incident that he found in records from Nagoya. See also ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shirō Kōhon’, section 2, volume 32, p. 82, and ‘Bunkyū no Seiji Roku’ 文久の世事録, an illustrated compilation of assassinations made by Nishikawa Yoshisuke, in ‘Nishikawa Yoshisuke Shashinrōku’ 西川吉輔写真録, volume 45, also in the Shiryō Hensanjo.
outskirts of Edo, a young village headman copied a report that he had received from Kondô Isami 近藤勇, leader of the Shinsengumi 新選組, including a sketch of the heads. The traveling merchant from Ōmi joined the crowd to see what had happened, and he carefully copied all the manifests. 'It was really frightening to contemplate who could have done such a deed.' The Sendai samurai Tamamushi Sadaiyû simply remarked, 'To expose wooden statues is indeed a rarity.' A song that soon became popular in the streets ran:

Not the heads of men
But the heads of puppets,
Three of them, are arranged
On the riverbank at Sanjô Bridge.

Refrain
Even though the Ashikaga shogun Takauji
Was an enemy of the court,
He got lucky and defeated people
Here and there.
It seems that Kusunoki was unlucky,
O-o shari shari.

So you’re a warrior,
You’ve got just one head
So be careful now.
After all, even puppets
Are being pilloried.

The heads had become the talk of the city. For a time at least, the Hirata disciples’ perspective on how to promote revering the emperor and expelling the barbarians had stolen the public spotlight.

The statement of public opinion displayed in the manifesto and advertized by the heads thus had a number of audiences. The first was a network focused on the collection of political information that served the Kyoto townspeople and other commoners or warriors. Miyachi has pointed out that according to

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61 Document in the Kojima Shiryōkan, Machida, titled ‘Kokuji Ibun’ 国事異聞, volume 12, section 7 (I wish to thank William Steele for kindly bringing this document to my attention). On the other hand, two notable Kantô diaries mention none of the assassinations that plagued Kyoto during this time nor the pillory of the Ashikaga statues. Instead, both content themselves with news of what the shogun was doing and reports on attempts to expel the barbarians. See Suzuki & Koike, pp. 564–84, and Ishii Mitsutarô 石井光太郎 & Uchida Yomozô 内田四方蔵, ed., Sekiguchi Nikki 關口日記, Yokohama-shi Kyôiku linkai, Yokohama. 1980, 15, pp. 15–64.

62 Satô, Ōmi Shōnin, p. 22.

63 Tamamushi, p. 1.

64 Nishikawa, section 2, p. 13. Watanabe Gempô later recalled how Irie Kuichi 入江九一, 1837–1864, entertained the nativists hiding in the Chôshû compound by singing this song to them. ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shiryô Kôhon’, p. 138.

65 For examples of how the incident was recorded in various journals and letters, see ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shiryô Kôhon’, from p. 59, and Haga, Bakumatsu Kokugaku, pp. 486–87.
the principles of samurai government, these people were excluded from political affairs and participation in the political process. By passing around letters from one another written specifically to disseminate newsworthy items and events, however, they accumulated, exchanged, and analyzed various kinds of information. They defined their political position by including political commentaries and criticism in their records of correspondence (Fūsetsu tome).\(^\text{66}\) In addition, it is important to consider the differences between the ways in which this information was processed, based on the status and stance of the people receiving it.

A significant part of the first audience were the loyalists then in Kyoto, who were not members of the Hirata school. Tsunoda Tadayuki stated as much in a poem he wrote at the time:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kimi no tame} & \quad \text{As for today’s target,} \\
\text{yo no tame tsukusu} & \quad \text{Surely the brave men} \\
\text{masurao ga} & \quad \text{Who render service to the world} \\
\text{masu masu nomu ka} & \quad \text{And to the emperor} \\
\text{kyō no matoi wa} & \quad \text{Will appreciate it more and more.}\(^\text{67}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Amakasu Bingo 甘粕備後, 1832–1869, a retainer of the Yonezawa domain, commented, ‘This was an odd thing to have happened, but it was done to give impetus to setting a time for expelling the barbarians.’ Following the arrest of the perpetrators, Furukawa Miyuki 古河躬之, 1810–1880, retainer of the court noble Shirakawa Sukenori 白河資訓 and sympathetic to the nativists, wrote a poem explicitly praising their deeds by mourning their fate.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tarekomete} & \quad \text{While I was secluded indoors} \\
\text{wagami no kaze wo} & \quad \text{Taking good care of myself} \\
\text{itou ma ni} & \quad \text{Against the blowing wind,} \\
\text{hayaku sakura wa} & \quad \text{The early cherry blossoms} \\
\text{chirisugi ni keri} & \quad \text{Were scattered and lost.}\(^\text{68}\)
\end{align*}
\]

On the other hand, some people received the news more critically. Sasaki Takayuki 佐々木高行, 1830–1910, high-ranking member of the sonnō jōi faction in Tosa, recorded in his diary: ‘This deed was really imprudent. . . . If this kind of random violence was done by the loyalists, then it was a mistake and simply shows that they will not be able to accomplish great things.’\(^\text{69}\) Suzuki Shigetane, one of the rivals of the Hirata school for the allegiance of the nativists, ridiculed the entire incident, calling it foolish. ‘Even if you cut off the heads of statues, what makes you think that wood can feel pain?’\(^\text{70}\)

A second audience consisted of members of the court nobility in whose name the deed had been performed. They, however, appear to have been the

\(^{67}\) Tanaka Zen’ichi, p. 97.
\(^{68}\) Haga, Bakumatsu Kokugaku, pp. 480 & 485.
\(^{69}\) ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shiryō Kōhon’, p. 92.
\(^{70}\) Haga, Bakumatsu Kokugaku, p. 483.
least well informed, perhaps because despite the attention paid the emperor at this critical juncture, they still remained relatively secluded from political affairs. Only Nakayama Tadayasu paid much attention to the incident, but he seems to have had difficulty in getting information. Following the arrest of the perpetrators, he wrote in his diary, ‘I heard that yesterday at dawn men from Aizu attacked people at three places in the capital. I don’t know what it was all about, but they must have been radicals.’ A little later he complained: ‘I still don’t know what’s going on.’ Hidden in the countryside, Iwakura apparently had good sources of information, but he made no comment on what he had learned.¹

Little mention of political events intruded into the detailed diaries kept by the emperor’s women attendants, those who were closer to him than anyone else.³ The political perspective of other nobles was so lofty as to overlook the incident altogether. Ichijō Tadaka 一条忠香, scion of one of the top five court families, concerned himself solely with the shogun’s visit to Kyoto, fears that British forces would attack Osaka as a consequence of the Richardson assassination at Namamugi by Satsuma troops, and messengers sent to shrines to pray for relief from the barbarians.⁴ The same held true for Madenokōji Naofusa 万里小路直房.⁵ Whether these court nobles were unaware of or uninterested in popular opinion, the absence of any notice paid the incident in their diaries points to the gulf that existed between highborn and baseborn and the difficulty the nativists experienced in making any impact on their superiors or the political process. The nobles responded to assassinations and threats to their own lives; they remained largely indifferent to propaganda in the streets, the only weapon at the nativists’ disposal.

The final audience was by far the most critical, consisting as it did of men in positions of governmental power and responsibility. They did not appreciate having their actions questioned, especially on the eve of the shogun’s visit to Kyoto. Date Munenari recorded the manifesto in his diary and wrote:

¹ Nakayama Tadayasu, Nihon Shiseki Kyōkai Sōsho 日本史籍協会叢書, 158: Nakayama Tadayasu Nikki 中山忠能日記, Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1973, 4, p. 478. Once he had received a more complete report, however, he showed not the slightest sympathy for the perpetrators. ‘It is clear that they showed contempt for His Majesty by not respecting the dignity of court rank and title . . . they ought to be severely punished’ (p. 481).
² The standard version of the major texts for this incident come from Iwakura Kō Jikki, 1, pp. 675–82, but when or whether Iwakura saw them remains unclear.
³ See, for example, the diary of Nakayama Isako 中山織子, great-great-great aunt to the Meiji emperor, which lists the names of those who visited the emperor. It is said that for the names of warriors to appear in the diary of the emperor’s attendant was a reflection of extraordinary times. But during the months of assassinations and manifestos, her diary is chiefly concerned with the state of the emperor’s health. Nakayama Isako, Nihon Shiseki Kyōkai Sōsho, 154: Nakayama Isako Nikki 中山織子日記, Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1967, pp. 808 & 442–95. The diary of Oshikōji Namiko 押小路薫子 is equally barren of political commentary. Nihon Shiseki Kyōkai Sōsho, 48–50: Oshikōji Namiko Nikki, 1968.
⁵ Nihon Shiseki Kyōkai Sōsho, 177: Madenokōji Nikki 万里小路日記, 1974.
Who could have done this? It is unspeakable and just as illegal as if a vast sum of money had been stolen. . . . It appears that this document arose from a hatred of Takuaji and I think that perhaps it is a metaphor for a desire for rule by the emperor.76

As a daimyo whose position was only as strong as the shogun he served, this suggestion can hardly have been welcome. Even more angry were Matsudaira, the military governor of Kyoto, and his staff. One complained that with the approaching shogunal visit, ‘the violent factions among the vagrants [furō] tried to disrupt the harmony between court and military. . . . They asserted absurd and vulgar arguments and made themselves out to be loyal supporters of the emperor, but their discussion led to nothing but violence and destruction.’77 Another wrote, ‘Anyone who saw the sight would immediately realize that it referred to the Tokugawa shoguns.’78

Commentaries on the decapitation of the Ashikaga statues thus ran the gamut from admiration to ridicule and contempt. Given the balance of power in Kyoto at the time, however, no matter how much the radical faction of imperial loyalists, both nativists and non-nativists, might have applauded the deed, they did not have the institutional basis to transform their approval into anything more than a criticism of the bakufu. The opportunity to make a display of critical public opinion is worth remembering, for it was asserted in a political space dominated by members of the ruling class. In this space, which the authorities were still loathe to make public, the expression of different opinions was transformed into a debate over what constituted appropriate action by those excluded from national politics.

Loyal Subjects or Grave Robbers? Aftermath and Beyond

The pillory of the Ashikaga statues resulted in an unexpected reversal of fortune for the Hirata disciples. In complete contrast to the tolerance shown the assassins of the previous months, Matsudaira insisted that the men who had assassinated the shoguns’ character be arrested, even threatening to execute them. His plan was approved by his colleagues who supported the bakufu, but opposition to it quickly surfaced among Chōshū and Tosa samurai as well as nativists who had managed to avoid being implicated in the incident. In the ensuing debate recorded in petitions to the Kyoto magistrate, memorials to the throne transmitted though the court college, Gakushūin, statements presented to Matsudaira himself and statements he prepared in response, both sides claimed to base their position on reverence for the emperor, but they differed dramatically over what this meant. Much of the argument remained confined

76 Nihon Shiseki Kyōkai Sōsho, 139: Date Munenari Zaikyō Nikki 伊達宗盛在京日記, 1972, p. 141.
to ruling-class circles, and only fragments reached commoner diarists and the nativists themselves.

In popular accounts of how the perpetrators were arrested, the attacking force swelled into the hundreds and the scene turned into a pitched battle. On 2.27 Aizu troops and bakufu policemen are said to have surrounded the compound of a residence known to house nativists, put ladders to the roof, beat down the door, and burst in with their spears. One man was severely wounded. Sengoku Satao 仙石佐多雄, a samurai from a branch of the Tottori domain and not one of the men who had pilloried the statues, fought back with his short sword. He wounded several soldiers, then leaped up the stairs to the roof, where he committed suicide. The policemen cut off his head, thrust it on a pike, and raised it high as off they marched. The rest were captured alive.79 At the rented house Noro shared with Nishikawa, the police wreaked havoc, breaking down the door to the main entrance, then smashing everything—screens, furniture, and utensils. At first the servants thought that they had been attacked by robbers, and they realized their mistake only when they saw the Tokugawa crest on the clothing of the attackers. ‘The destruction was beyond description,’ reported Tamamushi Sadaiyū. He went on to criticize the policemen. ‘They could not have been officials to have shown so little restraint in committing such destruction so close to the palace. They must have been ruffians who borrowed the Tokugawa crest.’80

The arrests provoked a good deal of comment in the letters circulating among the nativists. Hirata Kanetane included at least three of them in his report to his superiors in Akita domain. Two accused Matsudaira of plotting treason in the mode of Ashikaga Takauji. Not for 250 years had the imperial city seen such violence and it resembled nothing so much as the sengoku period. ‘Naturally this showed a lack of deference to the court.’ The other declared, ‘If the bakufu issued the order to commit these acts of violence, then the shogun does not deserve to be called the emperor’s retainer.’ A third made a more sweeping indictment: ‘The traitors in Kantō suppress the court’s authority, allow trade with the barbarians, and arbitrarily act just as though there were no emperor in the world of the Tokugawa shoguns.’81 The writer came close to calling the shogun a rebel against the throne, and the implication was that rebels deserve to be overthrown. Granted that in the eyes of the imperial loyalists Matsudaira could do no right, it is nevertheless clear that the violence of the arrests had outraged at least a segment of public opinion.

Matsudaira ordered the arrests because, while the assassination of low-ranking retainers and threats against their masters might be overlooked, criticism of the bakufu could not. ‘These men pretended to be talking about the Ashikaga shoguns, but in reality they despised the bakufu. They swaggered about

79 Shimo Ina Gunshi, p. 118.
claiming to respect the emperor, but they acted completely arbitrarily.’ In his view the pillory of the statues represented not the vengeance of Heaven on traitors, but an insult to the imperial court itself. As Bob Wakabayashi has pointed out, ‘We . . . often fail to appreciate the prestige and significance that imperially granted “names” have had for the Japanese people.’ Anyone granted court rank and title also received ‘sacred authority, which only the emperor and court could bestow.’ Keeping this issue in mind helps make sense of the justification that Matsudaira gave for making the arrests, ‘Despite what people say about Takauiji, he had received court rank and title. . . . To humiliate a high-ranking noble in this way means nothing other than despising the court and disrespecting the bakufu. Such violence is like robbing a grave and flogging the corpse.’ Matsudaira went on to say, ‘If they really wanted to act out of devotion to the emperor, they should have said so, and even though they are base commoners, we would have permitted them to make their proposals. But what sort of people are these to commit such an atrocity without waiting for orders? Having made light of the court’s rules, they have lost the essence of being retainers. For this they must be punished.’

There are also good instrumental reasons why these men and no others were arrested. The assassinations carried out earlier in the year had been done by tightly organized groups of warriors from a few major domains who were highly suspicious of outsiders. Having completed their kills, these warriors, those who were not ronin at least, could then retreat to the safety of their domains’ compounds, which were off-limits to bakufu policemen. Even the slaughter of the radical activists from Satsuma in the Teradayama incident had been carried out not by bakufu policemen but by troops dispatched by Shimazu Hisamitsu, de facto daimyo of Satsuma.

The nativists, on the other hand, were a much more eclectic group with members drawn from all over Japan and who had come to Kyoto in small groups from minor domains. They welcomed anyone who expressed allegiance to the teachings of Hirata Atsutane, and among these was an Aizu man, Ōba Kyōhei, who, according to another disciple, was an amusing fellow who wrote good poetry. Ōba was also a spy for Matsudaira. Once he had identified the perpetrators as Hirata disciples and informed on where they lived, capturing them

83 Toyama & Kaneko, pp. 74–75.
84 Tokutomi Ichirō 徳富喜一郎, Kinsei Nihon Kokuminshi Sonnō-jōi Hen 近世日本国民史尊皇攘夷編, Min’yūsha, 1936, p. 267.
85 Conrad Totman has pointed out that Matsudaira was powerless to stop shishi violence, ‘in part because the court obstructed his activities, in part because many of the shishi lived in daimyo residences and were therefore beyond his jurisdiction.’ The Collapse of the Tokugawa Bakufu, p. 56.
86 Nishikawa, section 2, p. 1. Records in Matsudaira’s office show that when he arrived in Kyoto, he appointed Ōba to a special junior position in the public affairs office with the mission of mingling with the ronin to find out what they were doing. Ōba swore to perform his duties faithfully. Tokutomi, p. 261.
was simply a matter of deploying the necessary resources. With the exception of Tsunoda Tadayuki and a few others who received advance warning to flee Kyoto, the only nativists to escape arrest were those who had domainal protection or who, like Matsuo Taseko, sought safety in the Chōshū compound.

Following the public announcement that men had been arrested for desecrating the statues, petitions and memorials arrived at the magistrate’s office, Matsudaira’s compound, and Gakushūin, the study institute that had become the headquarters for the reformist faction among the nobility. According to Tamamushī Sadaiyū, those sent to the city magistrate’s office claimed that all the prisoners were righteous men and should be released immediately. If they were not set free, then the city magistrates would become the objects of great rage so they had better take precautions. ‘I heard that this put the city magistrates in even greater fear for their lives.’ Perhaps because all these petitions were presented anonymously, their writers felt that they could get away with bald threats. A politer petition addressed to Matsudaira from Mito retainers and various Ronin argued that showing benevolence by pardoning men who had acted sincerely and righteously would encourage loyalty and build support for the bakufu. Such statements demonstrate that a number of the loyalists in the city sympathized with the nativist perpetrators of the incident and agreed with their position.

Support for the nativists came even from those clearly not of their school. On 3.2 Yamagata Aritomo 山県有朋, 1838–1922, a Chōshū colleague, and a samurai from Tosa presented a lengthy memorial to Gakushūin, a forum that they hoped had sufficient prestige to put pressure on Matsudaira. The memorial stated that any unintentional insult to the court ought to be weighed against the nativists’ loyalist zeal in coming to Kyoto to offer their services to the emperor.

These men were in Kyoto to exhaust themselves in loyal service to the nation, but unable to snatch a moment’s rest or wait for the expulsion of the barbarians, they did what they did out of an excess of valiant rage and hatred for the Ashikaga. They were not acting arbitrarily at all.

87 From Shiba Taichirō’s account, it appears that Oba inadvertently betrayed his comrades, but other sources insist that Matsudaira had appointed him to spy on the radicals. ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shiryō Kōhon’, p. 148.
88 Founded in 1847 for court nobles and officials as a school for Chinese studies, in 1849 Gakushūin began to offer lectures on Japanese subjects. By 1860 peasants and townspeople were allowed to attend its public lectures, and in 1862 it became a forum for debate when both imperial and bakufu loyalists received lecturerships. After the Chōshū forces were expelled from Kyoto in 1864, the school lost its political coloration. Kyoto no Rekishi 京都の歴史, 7: Baku-matsu no Gekidō 幕末の激動, Kyōto Shishi Hensanjo, 1974, p. 301. See also Huber, Revolutionary Origins, p. 126, for its relations with Chōshū.
90 Iwakura-Kō Jikki, pp. 678–79. This text can also be found in Tokutomi Ichirō, Kōshaku Yamagata Aritomo Den 公爵山県有朋伝, Yamagata Aritomo-kō Kinen Jigyōkai, 1933, 1, pp. 270–72.
In short, the authors of this statement completely rejected Matsudaira’s interpretation of the event.

This memorial focuses specifically on the issue of what it meant to respect the emperor. The authors pointed out that the bakufu had recently issued a general amnesty for the assassins of Ii Naosuke, yet Ii had held appointment to court office.

In our humble opinion, when it comes to clarifying name and position, no matter what kind of court rank a person holds, he should be denounced if he does evil deeds; a person who exhausts himself in loyal service should be rewarded, even if he holds no rank at all. Otherwise, people holding court rank will be able to do evil deeds whenever they please and will end up despising those who are loyal.

In the view of bakufu officials and Mito scholars, men of talent should be put to good use, but the idea that subordinates could judge their superiors was anathema, the ultimate confusion of name and function. Thus when the memorial went on to propose that the perpetrators of the Ashikaga incident be given court rank as an encouragement to loyalists everywhere, it doubly enraged bakufu supporters by drawing on an argument difficult to refute: the desirability of promoting able men.

This memorial also addressed the question of the proper approach toward foreigners. It pointed out that Ashikaga Yoshimitsu had usurped imperial authority by calling himself ‘king’ in paying tribute to China, and this claim was still evident on his memorial tablet enshrined in his mortuary temple, Kaenji.

Since this is completely illegal and the deed of a traitor that ought not to be permitted in the realm even for a day, if you would remove the memorial tablet that makes this claim and erase its inscription as an admonition to traitorous retainers and uncharitable subjects . . . the men of high purpose would be unable to stifle the fervor of their thanks.

Furthermore, this rectification of history had implications for the present because it would cause ‘the emperor’s authority over our sacred land to shine beyond the seas.’ Given that the barbarian ships were already ‘raiding’ Yokohama and threatening the Inland Sea, it did not make sense for people who offered service to the nation to remain in prison.92

The memorial clearly shows the importance that symbolic gestures had for the loyalists. Indeed, an uncharitable reader might question their allegiance to clarifying name and function, given their own confusion of image and reality.

To equate the pillory of statues with the assassination of a leading bakufu administrator or to assume that destroying a memorial tablet would deter the foreigners, however, can also be read as a demonstration of the dominance of sonnō jōi ideology in late Tokugawa thought. In such a system, it was not easy to distinguish between different kinds of action; at the symbolic level, all were equally significant.

92 Iwakura-Kō Jikki, pp. 678–79.
A Hirata disciple from Iyo sent his own lengthy memorial, heavily larded with Chinese phrases, to Gakushūin. He too defended the perpetrators by expounding on the evil deeds done by the Ashikaga shoguns, including ‘bending their knees before the foreign barbarian to beg for money. . . . For this usurper to be enshrined at Tōji-in pollutes the national essence [kokutai 国体]. . . . To thus despise the court is outrageous and treason against Heaven.’ He then foretold dire consequences if these crimes continued to be ignored: ‘Is it not likely that even little people from foreign lands might some day receive the title of King of Japan?’ He admitted that to pillory the heads of statues might seem a crazy thing to do, but the intent was to ‘chastise the hearts of disloyal subjects’. Only people of treasonous intent could be offended by such deeds, whereas ‘sincere and loyal people are delighted.’ Given the urgency of the task of expelling the barbarians, ‘these pure and loyal men should be regarded with compassion, their lack of propriety in carrying out such radical deeds should be overlooked, and they should be pardoned.’

A third appeal for pardon voiced a further-reaching criticism of military rule. Like Yamagata and his friends, Takeo Masatane 竹尾正胤 from Mikawa, himself a member of the Hirata school, raised the slogan of clarifying names and function, but he put a different twist on it. ‘Since they are men with red hearts, they acted in disregard of the importance of court rank. To denounce them as traitors would be to call traitors as well all those within the four seas who think and feel as they do.’ He argued that name and function had been out of kilter since the founding of the Kamakura bakufu because ‘traitors have made light of the court and insisted on their own military might. . . . Now that everyone is following the Way of respecting the emperor, the time has come to clarify the relationship between lord and retainer and cleanse the military houses of their disgusting habits.’

Takeo also took a step further the indictments posted with the pillory of the statues’ heads when he proposed that the Ashikaga shoguns and all others like them, going back to the founding of the Kamakura bakufu, be erased from the historical record.

Those people committed crimes such that should not be permitted in Heaven or earth. . . . Many graves, stone monuments, memorial tablets, statues, and other things can be found in temples in Kyoto and Kamakura . . . I propose that a court decree be issued to the bakufu ordering that every reminder of these traitors be swept away, the memorial tablets and statues burned, the names erased from the gravestones, and the gravestones thrown into the sea.

93 Nishikawa, pp. 30–31. According to Watanabe Gempō, Matsudaira hated the author of this memorial for his having presented it, and so the author returned to Omishima as soon as possible. ‘Dai-Nihon Ishin Shiryō Kōhon’, p. 138. Another long memorial, with the name of the author omitted, is found in Hirata, ‘Fūun Himitsu Tantei Roku’, volume 2.

94 The text is found in Asai, ‘Ashikaga Shōgun’, p. 299. ‘Red heart’ was a standard metaphor for loyalist tendencies—the redder the color, the deeper the conviction.

This extreme proposal implied that the way to return to Japan’s ancient past was to eradicate everything that stood between it and the present, including the principle of military rule. Coming as he did from the same school as the perpetrators of the incident, Takeo could be expected to share their vision of Japanese history and their assessment of current dangers. Like the other memorialists, he drew on categories current at the time (rectifying name and function, promoting men of talent and dedication, revering the emperor and expelling the barbarian), and engaged the indictments posted with the statues and the public announcement of the arrests that followed.

These memorials, however, did not speak to each other. Only the members of the Gakushuin and bakufu administrators were in a position to know everything being said. Insofar as they continued to possess privileged knowledge, significant obstacles obviously remained in the circulation of public opinion.96

The memorials caused considerable controversy in the circles of the ruling class. Led by Sanjō Sanetomi 三条實美, nobles from Gakushuin made a formal statement to the highest bakufu officials then in Kyoto, Hitotsubashi Keiti and Matsudaira Shungaku 松平春嶽, arguing that if the extenuating circumstances of the perpetrators’ feelings were taken into account, they were in fact righteous men. Even if they could not be pardoned, their sentences should at least be reduced. The imperial prince Asahiko 朝彦, a supporter of these nobles, made an even stronger statement to one of Matsudaira Shungaku’s retainers:

The court should have been informed before the arrests were made. . . . There have been reports that when the perpetrators were arrested, spears and battering rams were used, some men were pierced through and killed, others were knocked down and killed. This was excessive violence . . . that shows a lack of concern for the emperor’s city. Since this sort of rude reaction was uncalled for, perhaps Higo no kami [Matsudaira Katamori] should be forced to commit suicide.97

The Aizu response to criticism was quick and furious. Matsudaira Katamori’s retainers realized that if the court deemed the perpetrators to have been in the right, then those who arrested them had to be in the wrong. They presented their case to Gakushuin thus: ‘Should orders be given for the early release of the prisoners, it will mean letting people get away with despising the highest rank a retainer can obtain and disregarding the court. . . . What is the basis for your reasoning that these men are righteous?’ The more moderate

96 A letter from Kyoto addressed to Kanetane on 4.22 said: ‘The various domains and ronin have all made statements concerning the Ashikaga incident. Since it is crucial that not one man of high purpose who serves the nation with a red heart lose his life when the foreign barbarians are pressing on us, a general pardon was issued at the beginning of this month. But, as usual, bakufu officials are keeping this secret and have yet to announce it to those below.’ Miyachi, ‘Bakumatsu Kokugaku’, p. 247.

97 Tokutomi, pp. 275–76. The original is in ‘Zoku Saimu Kiji’, written by Nakane Yukie 中根雪江, one of Matsudaira Shungaku’s retainers who joined the Hirata school in 1838. Miyachi, ‘Bakumatsu Kokugaku’, p. 262. According to another version of this text, Asahiko went on to say, ‘He should have reported to the court and consulted his former master. Not to have done so and to have acted on his own was rash.’ Kobayashi, p. 162.
court nobles then sent a message to Matsudaira by way of apology, declaring that they did not know why the ronin had been called righteous since righteous men would never be so wicked as to cause a disturbance. Matsudaira compromised by releasing all the prisoners of samurai and honorary samurai status to the custody of various domains. A few court nobles who had received financial support from the merchant Nagao Ikusaburō tried to get his punishment reduced as well. In the view of the Aizu samurai, this merely showed their ignorance of bakufu regulations that maintained a clear distinction between punishments for samurai and commoners. Nagao remained in the Rokkaku prison in Kyoto; during the battle for the city between Chōshū and the combined Aizu-Satsuma forces in 1864, his jailers killed him.98

The Ashikaga incident ended in a severe setback for the Hirata school of nativists. More than twenty of the most vocal faction had been driven from the city, either into the custody of various domains or into hiding. Having attracted the unwelcome attention of the authorities, those left behind retreated to their original task of collecting information for their superiors, as in the case of Hirata Kanetane, or lecturing on Kojiki, as was done by Fukuba Bisei. Exiled to a remote village and guarded by unsympathetic relatives, the erstwhile merchant Nishikawa Yoshisuke fumed, ‘Shut up as I am, the world is passing me by. Whenever I think about how difficult it is to tell whether I’ll be able to offer my assistance in the realm of national affairs, I weep so much that my family thinks I’m crazy.’99 Like the others arrested following the incident, his release came only after the Meiji Restoration.

Conclusion
 Attempts to assess the contribution of the late-Tokugawa nativists to the coming of the Meiji Restoration have often ended in frustration. It is well known that nativism was ‘in the air’ and the Hirata school in particular attracted numerous disciples, but it is difficult to say much more. As Harootunian has pointed out, whereas nativists aspired to a return to ancient days, nativism itself provided no program by which this return was to be achieved. A devoted follower of Motoori Norinaga or even Atsutane would expect to spend his or her time reciting poetry, studying the past, and worshipping the creator deities. Following the Restoration, a few nativists were for a brief time appointed to positions in the central government that dealt with religious affairs, but when they opposed moving the capital to Tokyo they were branded enemies of the state and dismissed. Several perpetrators of the Ashikaga in-

98 Tōyama & Kaneko, Kyōto Shugoshoku, pp. 77–80. A vivid account of this is given in Satow, pp. 148–239. Hirano Kuniomi, leader of loyalist troops at Ikuno, was also executed at this time.

99 Nishikawa, pp. 44–45. Even before this incident, Nishikawa’s involvement in nativist affairs had put him at odds with his neighbors. They started giving his personal name, Yoshisuke 吉介, its Chinese pronunciation of kichigai, meaning ‘crazy’. Finally he began using the characters 吉輔 to write his name, and these are generally used today. Nishikawa, p. 182.
cident became shrine priests, just as Aoyama Hanzō does in Yoake Mae. In contrast, few of the activists who brought about the fall of the bakufu showed much interest in nativism per se. William Beasley has pointed out the regions of concentrations of Hirata disciples overlapped hardly at all with the southwestern domains that carried out the Restoration. Therefore, he asserts, ‘one cannot establish a direct correlation between the spread of Hirata influence and the kinnō movement of the 1860s.’ 100 An examination of the people involved in the Ashikaga incident suggests instead that Hirata disciples were desperately committed to the loyalist movement, but affiliation in the Hirata school was no match for the institutional strength of Satsuma and Chōshū.

When I first came across this incident, it struck me as a purely symbolic gesture; men unable to attack the shogun himself had hanged him in effigy. Stephen Greenblatt sums up this type of situation when he writes: ‘any individual or group confronting a hostile institution that possesses vastly superior force has recourse to the weapon of the powerless: the seizure of symbolic initiative.’ 101 Nevertheless, an examination of the texts has convinced me that both more and less were going on. First, the nativists did not aim at bringing down the shogun. Their intent was rather to convince him of the error of his ways in hopes that he would carry through on the promise, made when he married Kazunomiya, to expel the barbarians. From that premise follows the second: the nativists were not simply making a symbolic statement; instead they crafted a polemic that both reflected and advanced the state of public opinion at the time. Regardless of the rationality of this public opinion, it yet criticized the structure of authority of its day. It asserted, if only briefly, a different vision of the way relations ought to be between state and people, one in which even the basest-born commoners could act politically out of loyalty to the emperor unmediated by an authoritarian hierarchically structured bureaucracy. By decapitating the Ashikaga statues, the nativists forced their way into the political public sphere, which up to then had been dominated by samurai who could draw on domainal solidarity. They thus managed to garner a response from a wide spectrum of sympathizers and opponents by pulling what has often been called a political prank. 102

I once visited Tōji-in, a pleasant and well-kept temple, and inspected the three Ashikaga statues, happily with their heads once more on their shoulders. I politely inquired about the 1863 incident. I was told, ‘Beheading? It didn’t happen here.’

100 Beasley, p. 145. The kinnō 動王 were the loyalists.
102 See, for example, Tōyama & Kaneko, p. 72, and Tokutomi, p. 278.