

A Study of *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*: A Unique *Liebestod* of the Japanese Taste

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1. Introduction

In every culture, in every epoch, human beings have yearned for love. Perhaps no other topic captures the popular imagination quite like love. Love seems to be the most irresistible of all emotions, for there has never been a time when love stories didn't attract an audience. However, even when the lovers seem to be destined for each other, their love story does not necessarily end with the familiar "and they lived happily ever after." Among love stories there is one genre worthy of note. It is "one of the most dependably heartrending of genres in all of world literature: *Liebestod*, or love-death" (Jorgensen 27). Certainly death, much like love, is another topic that captures the popular imagination. *Wikipedia* explains "*liebestod*" as follows:

When used as a literary term, *liebestod* (from German *Liebe*, love and *tod*, death) refers to the theme of erotic death or "love death" meaning the two lovers' consummation of their love in death or after death. Two-sided examples include *Pyramus and Thisbe*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and to some degree *Wuthering Heights*. ("Liebestod," *Wikipedia*)¹

The aim of this study is to foster wider recognition of Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), Japan's greatest and most famous playwright, and in the world of literature another writer of "*liebestod*" analogous to Shakespeare and other masters. Chikamatsu, pursuing the theme of "*liebestod*" in *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (1703), eulogizes love's consummation in death, as if in approval of Romeo's words in *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1594): "That unsubstantial Death is amorous" (5.3.103)². *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, Chikamatsu's first double suicide play, is one of the best known among the domestic tragedies in Japan. At the close of the play when we witness the spectacle of the lovers, truly at last united in their wedding bed, but one of death, we cannot help but sense the synthesis of "*eros* and *thanatos*" ("love and death"). This last catastrophic scene of the play encompasses the audience's lingering mental image of the whole play—the *tableau vivant* of lovers dying in each other's arms.

What is the meaning of "the love-death identity" (Frye 25) in this dramatic *denouement*? Why did Chikamatsu write "*liebestod*"? Does he idealize "amorous" death? Is double suicide for him the

ultimate culmination of love? How does he deal with the themes of love and death? This study is an attempt to answer these questions. The study will make concurrent references to *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's "liebestod." The comparison is relevant, for both Shakespeare and Chikamatsu can be seen as quintessential playwrights of the Renaissance period in their respective countries. Chikamatsu was active during the *Genroku* era (1688-1704), the Japanese Renaissance period, which came about 100 years after the Elizabethan era (1558-1603) in England. Furthermore, both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* are love-suicide plays respectively representing the writers' earlier phase of craftsmanship as playwrights. The lovers in these early plays are innocent lovers and their deaths are quite romantic, particularly in comparison with the passionate, middle-aged lovers of the late plays *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606) and Chikamatsu's *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (1720).

The main focus of this study concerns two elements in *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*. (1) The theme of pilgrimage in Chikamatsu's "religion of love": in this play the lovers are regarded as pilgrims. This study discusses the theme of the protagonists' spiritual growth as pilgrims in the light of salvation. (2) Chikamatsu's "cult of double suicide": in this play double suicide is regarded as a chance for a new life, a departure from this transitory life for eternal life. What does this signify?

2. Tokubei and unpleasant company

The Love Suicides at Sonezaki is the first of the eleven love-suicide plays Chikamatsu wrote in his lifetime for the "jōruri" or puppet theatre in Osaka. It was based on an actual case of double suicide. In other words, it was based on a true story of young lovers who committed "shinju" (double suicide). With the instinct of a playwright, Chikamatsu saw in the real-life case effective material for a drama of the new genre, "sewamono," or drama of contemporary life. In fact, it became the first of Chikamatsu's *cult* plays. Love-suicide plays became so popular that they provoked other double suicides: they produced a cult among ill-fated lovers, and sparked a love-suicide fever, until the *Tokugawa* government forbade the use of "shinju" in the title of plays. The play was revived after a long hiatus in its performance history, and now it has become one of the great favorites of the Japanese stage. It is about the tragic story of Ohatsu and Tokubei, and the phrase "Ohatsu and Tokubei" has become, just like "Romeo and Juliet," an epithet commonly used to describe a pair of ill-fated lovers.

Ostensibly, the main action seems to centre on the protagonist's relationship with his beloved courtesan, but an in-depth analysis shows that the action of the play centers on the complicated relationships of the protagonist with his uncle, his friend and his beloved prostitute, respectively. Whereas the female characters are not particularly well delineated, the emotions of the male characters are subtly represented. There are three major male characters: the unnamed master of *Hiranoya*, Tokubei, and Kuheiji. They are all inhabitants of "ukiyo" (the floating world). The floating world essentially boils down to money and sex, which are represented by two worlds respectively: the merchant class and the pleasure quarters. These two worlds meet through the actions of the following three male characters.

(1) Tokubei, the protagonist of the play, is a 25-year-old soy-sauce store clerk. He aspires to set himself up like his uncle in business some day. (2) Tokubei's unnamed uncle, the master of *Hiranoya*,

represents the merchant world. He is a powerful Osaka merchant—an honest, hardworking and scrupulous man. (3) Kuheiji, the third man, is Tokubei's close friend of many years, and he is a man about town: he is an aficionado of the pleasure district. Tokubei is instinctively attracted to him, for Kuheiji embodies his unconscious wishes. Kuheiji has already established himself in business as an oil merchant. Kuheiji seems to Tokubei to represent a sense of liberation: he glories in the world of sex and money. However, Kuheiji turns out to be an unscrupulous man, for he successfully swindles Tokubei out of his money.

It is a critical commonplace to say that in Chikamatsu's plays the conflict is between "*giri*" (social obligation) and "*ninjo*" (individual/human feelings), but the conflict within the protagonist is not one peculiar to Japan. The conflict can also be regarded as the universal conflict within human nature: the conflict between the *superego* and the *id*. In other words, Tokubei is not only a particular Osaka merchant living in the *Genroku* era, but an "Everyman," a protagonist like those in the best known of the morality plays of the Middle Ages. In such medieval plays "Everyman" represents all mankind, and seeks to answer the overriding religious question: "What must a man do to be saved?" To understand the human relationships of these three male characters and realize Chikamatsu's allegorical way of characterization, we had better to turn to Freud's psychoanalysis.

According to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), there are conflicts and interventions among various sets of forces in our mind. Freud identifies each part of the mind: the *superego*, the *ego* and the *id*. The portion of the psyche called the "*superego*" reflects social standards learned from parents and teachers. Tokubei's uncle is the *superego* character, and he is, like Escalus, the ruling Prince of Verona in *Romeo and Juliet*, the ultimate authoritative speaker. Since this unnamed uncle has no child of his own to hand over the headship of a family, he wants Tokubei to be heir to the firm. He wants Tokubei to marry his wife's niece, so he inveigles Tokubei's stepmother to agree with his marriage proposal, providing her with a lavish dowry. However, Tokubei politely refuses the marriage with a girl chosen for him, for he has already been captivated by a woman, a young courtesan named Ohatsu. His uncle will not relent and tries to force him into marriage. When Tokubei categorically refuses the proposal again, he gets infuriated. As in *Romeo and Juliet* when old Capulet storms cruelly at his daughter when she refused to marry the man of his choice, Paris, so Tokubei's uncle storms furiously at him. He fires Tokubei from the firm, demands the immediate return of the lavish dowry, and sentences him to banishment: "I'll chase you from Osaka and never let you set foot here again!" (42). In *Romeo and Juliet* "banished" (3.2.69) is the most painful word for Romeo and Juliet to hear, and it is the same for Ohatsu and Tokubei.

Whereas in *Romeo and Juliet* there is not any clearly delineated villain, the villain of *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* is Kuheiji. Though Donald Keene calls him "a paper-thin villain" (15), it is not accurate. Kuheiji is the character representing the *id*. The "*id*" is the innate instinctive drive to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and it works on the "pleasure principle." Kuheiji is a foil to Tokubei the merchant, as Mercutio is a foil to Romeo the lover. Though Tokubei has always treated Kuheiji like a brother, he is eventually tricked by him: Tokubei's generous nature has been his undoing. Tokubei has too scrupulous a conscience to be a shrewd businessman. There is a dramatic contrast between these two

characters. While Tokubei cannot return the dowry money to his uncle, Kuheiji succeeds in stealing it. In short, Kuehiji is Tokubei's "alter ego," the dark side of his own self.

Tokubei is the character representing the *ego*. The "ego" works on the "reality principle" and controls the pleasure-seeking desire of the *id* in order to meet the demands of the external world. Tokubei is caught in the middle between social expectations and desire. While he aspires to be a respectable merchant like his uncle, a man of complete integrity, he also wants to enjoy the sense of freedom of his profligate friend. The *ego* is destined to suffer, for it is oppressed by the *superego* from above and poked up by the *id* from under. Tokubei is torn apart by two forces: the sense of duty to his master and the allurements of money and sex in the example of his friend. Who will help Tokubei out of these difficulties? It is Ohatsu who offers him a helping hand. In the end Tokubei rejects the wife-to-be his uncle has chosen, and sacrifices his middle-class, domestic future for the love of this prostitute.

3. What is Ohatsu?

Ohatsu is a poor girl who had been sold by starving parents into bondage in Sonezaki when a child. She is a girl of 19. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's age is reduced to 13 from 16 in the original narrative poem, *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) by Arthur Brooke. Shakespeare strongly emphasizes the point of adding to the impression of youth, freshness, and vulnerable innocence in the heroine. In terms of age, there is a change in Chikamatsu, too. Ohatsu's original died at the age of 21. However, Chikamatsu changed her age to 19. Emphasis is given to the ill-fated years of the two lovers. Shortly before the double suicide Ohatsu refers to their star-crossed destiny:

It's strange, this is your unlucky year
Of twenty-five, and mine of nineteen.
It's surely proof how deep are our ties
That we who love each other are cursed alike.
All the prayers I have made for this world
To the gods and to the Buddha, I here and now
Direct to the future: in the world to come
May we be reborn on the same lotus! (54-55)

In *Romeo and Juliet*, a tragedy of fate, events always happen at exactly the wrong time. Just as Shakespeare emphasizes the theme of fate, so does Chikamatsu, though he does not necessarily show how fate operates.

Ohatsu lives in the *Temmaya*, a house of pleasure in a red-light district. The *Temmaya* is situated in an enclosed place on a river sandbank called "Dôjima Shinchi," newly licensed quarters in Osaka. This sandbank is placed between the Sonezaki and the Dôjima rivers. In other words, Ohatsu's space is doubly hemmed in between two rivers, and there is no easy way to escape. It is a special world quite segregated from the world without. Ohatsu literally lives the life of a bird in a cage. Or to put it another way, she is a prostitute living in the "the Slough of Despond." Nothing but a wretched life seems to await her in future. To all appearances her life is smothered in a sense of helplessness, but Ohatsu

blooms beautifully like a lotus flower blooming out of the mud. The flower of the sacred lotus is said not to lose its immaculateness even if it is grown up in mud, so it is used as an example of reincarnated lives in Buddhism. Were it not for Tokubei's love for her and the Buddhist faith she embraces, Ohatsu could not manage to survive.

The Love Suicides at Sonezaki begins with a description of Ohatsu's frequent pilgrimages to Kwannon, her visits to the Buddhist temples in the Osaka area. This opening scene is, as it were, the "Prologue" or the "Induction" to the play. In most cases, however, the performance of this scene is omitted. Surprisingly, even in Donald Keane's superb translation, this scene is totally omitted. However, this scene is *not* simply an enumeration of the thirty-three temples of Kwannon. This is an important preparation for the rest of the play. In this scene Ohatsu makes pilgrimages to thirty-three avatars of the Kwannon. At each temple she offers a "prayer slip" and recites a sutra. It was believed that praying to Kwannon would wash away pilgrims' sins and that when the pilgrims completed the pilgrimage, their prayers would be answered.

What are the thirty-three avatars of Kwannon? According to the "*Jōdo*" (the Pure Land of Happiness) belief which worships Amida Buddha as its savior, Amida Buddha will deliver us based on his forty-eight vows which state that he will deliver anyone who calls his name. Kwannon is said to be the embodiment of Amida Buddha's mercy. In the concluding passage of the "Prologue" Chikamatsu alludes to Kwannon as one who, "taking as many as thirty-three different shapes, appears in the nether world of dust, and guiding and teaching us by means of sensualities and carnal desires, makes love a bridge for us to cross to attain Salvation" (trans. by Sasayama 155). Referring to this passage, Sasayama observes, "Behind these homiletic words lies the conception of the prostitute as [an] incarnation of *das Ewing Weibliche*, an esoteric view which is rather familiar to Oriental religions" (156). However, in the figure of Kwannon, Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), a British historian, sees an image other than Sasayama's "*das Ewing Weibliche*" (the eternal feminine), namely, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. According to Toynbee, Kwannon is one of the vestiges of the worship of fertility in the paradoxical form of a virgin female goddess. This worship of the virgin goddess who was also a mother still survives even in Christendom in the two major branches of the Christian Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church venerates her as the *Theotókos*, "God-bearer," and the Catholic branch of the Western Church venerates her as "Our Lady." In the Buddhist world, Mahayana Buddhism, the Northern school of Buddhism, has recaptured the virgin goddess by changing the sex of one of the bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, and transforming him into Kwan Yin in Chinese, known as Kwannon in Japanese (Toynbee 126). In Mahayana Buddhism, a "bodhisattva" is a Buddhist saint who is able to reach Nirvana but who has vowed to remain in the world out of compassion in order to save suffering beings. This is the reason bodhisattva are revered. According to Toynbee, "they have voluntarily postponed their exit from the World into Nirvana in order to help their fellow creatures to enter this spiritual haven." (4) Thus Ohatsu comes to seek salvation in the worship of Kwannon through her pilgrimage.

4. Lovers as pilgrims

Pilgrimage is a journey to a holy land or a place associated with a holy figure. The purpose of the pilgrimage is to establish one's faith. In Shakespeare's plays, a man in love is compared to a pilgrim. In *Romeo and Juliet* (1.5.95-112), Romeo is presented as a pilgrim of the heart. He is searching for the ideal love. In addition to *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare used this literary convention in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2.4.145), *The Merchant of Venice* (1.1.119-20), and *Hamlet* (4.5.25-6), to mention but a few. Shakespeare manipulates this convention of "lovers as pilgrims" in order to emphasize the absolute devotion of a lover to his beloved. It is no coincidence that the title of an anthology of 20 collected poems that were attributed to "W. Shakespeare" is called *The Passionate Pilgrim*³.

In *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, which should be seen as an allegorical drama, Ohatsu and Tokubei are also "passionate pilgrims," devotees of "the religion of love" who embark on a quest for something conceived as amorous and sacred. In *Romeo and Juliet* Romeo describes himself as a pilgrim approaching a shrine, and the saint in the holy shrine is Juliet. In *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* Ohatsu is not the object of Tokubei's pilgrimage but a companion who plays the role of his guide, like Beatrice who guides the poet Dante through the heavenly spheres in the *Divine Comedy* (1307-21). For Tokubei, the "michiyuki," a love-suicide journey, is a refining process of his soul, or the time for spiritual awakening. It is, as it were, a purgatorial journey, a process of journeying to become sufficiently pure to go to heaven. In his infatuation with Ohatsu he did not sufficiently realize the true nature of joint death, about which Ohatsu is resolute once her mind is made up. In the *Divine Comedy* we see Dante Alighieri travel through hell and purgatory. He is eventually granted permission to ascend through the various heavenly realms all the way up to the Empyrean, the highest part of heaven. Once Ohatsu and Tokubei are on their way to the sacred wood at Sonezaki, a gateway for rebirth, they are no longer a mere prostitute and a mere shop clerk who bemoan their lives in the floating world, but two pilgrims heading for "Nirvana," and they acquire, in Donald Keene's words, "the dignity of a man and woman about to meet death" (24).

It is generally agreed that women have stronger personalities than men in Chikamatsu's world. Certainly, it is women who morally dominate the world. Tokubei's decision about love-suicide is determined by Ohatsu's stronger desire. In *Romeo and Juliet* it is Juliet who broaches the subject of marriage. After all, in both Shakespeare and Chikamatsu, it is women who are always in a spiritually superior position. Women are presumed to be spiritually superior to the male lovers, and inhabit a higher level of virtue, close to sanctity.

5. The meaning of "shinju" (double suicide)

The central question of *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* is the motive for the double suicide. Why do the lovers kill themselves? What drives Ohatsu and Tokubei to double suicide? It is not because of money trouble. Tokubei is not mercenary. He rejects a wife-to-be his uncle has chosen, and sacrifices his domestic, middle-class future in exchange for Ohatsu, an "insignificant" prostitute. What, then, do they die for? Critics have offered various explanations. Professor Yamagiwa argues that it is the "sense

of duty which in large measure forces him to take the road to suicide” (361). Professor Sasayama says, “The adverse circumstances, both social and domestic, in which the lovers find themselves, together with their lively sense of honour and obligation, drive them finally into a tight corner, where they choose to die together” (153). Certainly, they can be free from the sense of “duty” or “obligation” after death, yet might we not also look at double suicide in a more affirming light? It might provide the answer to the question: How does Chikamatsu deal with eternal themes of love and death?

Double suicide has different meanings to Ohatsu and Tokubei. Ohatsu is a prostitute living in the gay quarters. There seems to be no way for her out of the tortures of an ill-starred love. Both her fate and the world go contrary to her. Ohatsu has no possibility of being saved in this life, so she wishes for the attainment of salvation after death at the hands of Amida Buddha: to be born again in the Buddhist Elysian Fields. Death with Tokubei is the only way out into Ching-tu or the Pure Land of Happiness. Ohatsu is convinced that death does not merely free them from the suffering of this life; it assures them an eternity of love. The subject of double suicide is broached by Ohatsu on account of her Buddhist faith. Ohatsu professes her faith that lovers who died together will be reborn on the same lotus calyx on the lake before Amida’s throne in the Western Paradise. In her death prayer she hopes: “... in the world to come / May we reborn on the same lotus!” (54).

To Tokubei, double suicide seems to be the only way out as well. Though he cannot afford to buy out Ohatsu, Tokubei can demonstrate to her the strength of his love by his decision to commit double suicide. Before this decision, Tokubei merely wanted to obliterate himself in order to disappear from the floating world. It is his meek submissiveness to his fate, for in this life they could not remain together. However, Tokubei undergoes a spiritual change in the course of his death-bound journey. In the beginning he is a whining lover, though passionate. However, he has much to learn.

In Chikamatsu’s unique interpretation of Buddhist doctrine double suicide brings about salvation. Ohatsu is convinced that death is the only way to salvation she can expect: she argues in the play for the cause of double suicide. It is something like the “creed of double suicide” as follows:

(1) Death for honor. Committing double suicide is not simply their last resort. Rather it is the demonstration of their self-respect. Tokubei is swindled through Kuheiji’s evil scheme. He is badly beaten, humiliated, and embarrassed publically: he is disgraced. Tokubei has lost both his money and his honor. In the play Ohatsu categorically says, “Tokubei has no choice but to kill himself. [...] Only death can wipe out the disgrace” (49, 50). As a man of honor, Tokubei cannot live in shame. So, he resolves to let death remove the shame, as if he were to emulate the *samurai*. Seen in this way, the suicide makes perfect sense. Their journey to death is their journey for self-realization. If they were lovers living in Judeo-Christian culture, Hell (not Paradise) would await Ohatsu and Tokubei for their unpardonable sin of suicide. However, in Japanese culture, “*hara-kiri*” (ritual suicide practiced by the Japanese *samurai*), for example, is the desperate attempt of a man to assert his values—such as honor, justice and the reputation of his family line—which would be lost if he did not resort to this harsh, violent solution: self-disembowelment on a sword.

(2) Death for love. They pledge eternal love, love in this world and the next. Double suicide is thus

not an escape but a self-assertion of love. Ohatsu asks about the point of living a long and wretched life in this life. In double suicide there is the consolation and exaltation of sharing love as they undergo a shared fate. In double suicide the lovers die in the belief that they will share the next existence together. It is a chance for a departure for a new life from this transitory life. Double suicide is prompted by a belief in the next incarnation “on the same lotus!” Ohatsu exhorts Tokubei to believe in another incarnation:

And if a time should come when we can no longer meet, did our promises of love hold only for this world? Others before us have chosen their reunion through death. To die is simple enough—none will hinder and none be hindered on the journey to the Mountain of Death and the River of Three Ways. (43)

(3) Death for salvation. It is the only way Ohatsu can expect to achieve eternity in the Pure Land of Happiness. It is no coincidence that Chikamatu describes double suicide as a religious act. Ohatsu and Tokubei believe that they will share the next existence together. For Ohatsu and Tokubei this is a creed, a belief that could not be questioned. In *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, to carry through the desire of one’s heart by death is understood to be a departure from this transitory life into an eternal life. Ohatsu predicates that there is life after death through her belief in Kwannon. Death is no longer the antithesis of life. It is the way to salvation. The love journey is the passage through death to everlasting life as well as the passage through life to death. This is “the love-death identity” in Chikamatsu. Seeking premature death is a way of hastening one’s meeting with one’s Creator.

6. Virtue of “*michiyuki*” (love-suicide journey)

Appropriate to the genre of the progress of a protagonist in love, the male lover’s character undergoes a spiritual change in the course of his journey. The “*michiyuki*” (death-bound journey) portion, the final section of the play, is a masterpiece in both style and content. Writing of the “*michiyuki*” scene, Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728), a famous philosopher and contemporary of Chikamatsu, is said to have left the following succinct comment on the lyrical quality of the writing: “Chikamatsu’s style can be seen clearly in the opening lines of the *michiyuki* journey section of *Love Suicide at Sonezaki*. One can judge his brilliance as a writer from these lines alone” (Gerstle 1). In his introduction Donald Keene calls this portion “one of the loveliest passages of Japanese literature”(24).

A dramatic climax of the play is when Ohatsu and Tokubei set out on the love journey from *Dōjima* to the thick wood of *Sonezaki*, a place to die. The narrator poetically gives the circumstantial accounts of the locations and scenery along the road, as well as the feeling of the lovers, alternating between agony and ecstasy. The world is too beautiful, and they regret leaving:

Farewell to this world, and to the night farewell.
We who walk the road to death, to what should we be likened?
To the frost by the road that leads to the graveyard,
Vanishing with each step we take ahead:
How sad is this dream of a dream! (51)

The life in this world is a dewdrop sparkling on a leaf. Here we should note “a constant awareness of the evanescence, the ephemerality of things which lend pathos to the drama” (Zaraspe 354). Certainly, both the immediacy and the finality of their end make this suicidal journey all the more pathetic.

On their way to the final destination Ohatsu and Tokubei for one moment take one last look at the concrete world they are going to leave behind. Brushing the dewdrops off the bushes they listen to the lingering notes of a temple bell. The sound of the temple bell announces the hour of the dawn, one moment before they commit suicide. This is the moment of epiphany. Tokubei grows to a mature enlightened pilgrim ready to resign himself to his fate and death.

TOKUBEI:

Ah, did you count the bell? Of the seven strokes
That mark the dawn, six have sounded.
The remaining one will be the last echo
We shall hear in this life.

OHATSU:

It will echo the bliss of nirvana. (52)

Listening to the sound of the temple bell, Tokubei achieves the same kind of spiritual enlightenment as his companion: he too perceives the echo of “the bliss of nirvana.” Their journey is neither an elopement nor a sentimental journey. It is a celebration of the movement of two pilgrims from the profane to the sacred.

Life is grasped by a series of the fleeting moments: the falling dews, the moment when they brush the grass, the lightning flash, spark from the flint. In the *Sonezaki* wood, Ohatsu and Tokubei, seeking for the place to put an end to their “unhappy lives” (55) are careful in choosing the place to die.

Shall it be here, shall it be there? When they brush the grass, the falling dew vanishes even quicker than their lives, in this uncertain world, a lightning flash—or was it something else? (54) Tokubei becomes enlightened regarding the ephemerality and values of man’s life in this world. After the “*michiyuki*,” the journey to the suicide spot, Tokubei is no longer a whining loser but achieves a spiritual maturity. His true character and his intrinsic value are made clear in the face of imminent death.

Similarly, Ohatsu, while envisioning the afterlife in the Pure Land of Happiness, muses and gives herself over to silent meditation:

Yes, for all our love, for all our grieving,
Our lives, our lots, have not been as we wished.
Never, until this very day, have we known
A single night of heart’s relaxation—
Instead, the tortures of an ill-starred love. (53)

Ohatsu and Tokubei, described in Chikamatsu’s language, command our sympathy, and the emotions penetrate the hearts of the audience.

7. The aesthetics of double suicide

The ill-fated lovers end up killing themselves together in the woods of *Sonezaki*, and their last moments are very lurid. Truly, their joint-suicide is nothing less than a bloody murder-suicide, a horrific act. Yet it is a moving spectacle, for in Chikamatsu's world there is something like the "aesthetics of double suicide." In the final section of the play, immediately before the final movement towards the catastrophe, Chikamatsu appeals to a new emotion which is painful, but at the same time accompanied by a sense of beauty and an outflow of affection. In double suicide, passion is inseparable from aesthetic feelings. Even in their preparation for death we find some aesthetics of self-annihilation.

Double suicide is a rite of passage through which they enter into an eternity. It assumes the form of a religious cult. They are to kill themselves at the pre-arranged spot in an agreed-upon way. Ohatsu exults that "I had this razor prepared in case we were overtaken on the way and separated. I was determined not to forfeit our name as lovers. How happy I am that we are to die together as we hoped!" (55). It is a ritual in which there are some rules to observe and precepts to follow in order to show beauty even in death. First, one needs to prepare one's body properly to depart this life. For a traveling outfit, Ohatsu is in pilgrimage garb, attired in white. "Ohatsu is dressed for death, a black cloak dark as the ways of love thrown over her kimono of spotless white" (51). While preparing the death-dealing dagger, Tokubei is scrupulous about appearance, and observes to Ohatsu: "I am so confident in our love that I have no fears even about death. And yet it would be unfortunate if because of the pain we are to suffer people said that we looked ugly in death" (55). Tokubei also shows his concern about the elegance of their clothes. According to his idea, the bodies of the victims must be arranged with grace, elegance, and color. Tokubei's transformation of personality is expressed in the new note of resolution and command. "Let me secure our bodies to this twin-trunked tree and die immaculately. We will become an unparalleled example of a lover's suicide" (55). Accordingly, Ohatsu carefully splits her light blue undersash in two for binding their bodies to the nearby twin-trunked tree, "the pine and palm that grow from a single trunk, a symbol of eternal love" (55), so that they eventually die in each other's arms.

Ohatsu and Tokubei embrace a simple belief: If anyone prays to Amida Buddha, "*Namu Amida*" (56), Buddha will come and guide them to the Pure Land at the time of death, and those who pray to Amida Buddha together will be posthumously reborn on the same lotus flower. According to Chikamatsu, Ohatsu and Tokubei completed their journey, and they have obtained their wish—to be one in the Western Paradise. This is a demonstration of innovative force of the Romantic Chikamatsu's religious creed. Love combined with faith can offer a chance for entry into Nirvana, a state of perfect happiness⁴. This is nothing less than Chikamatsu's glorification of double suicide. In other words, love as a combination of "*jiji*" (Buddha's merciful and compassionate love) and "*jôji*" (an affair of the heart) serves as the foundation of salvation. Salvation now takes place not solely by the saving grace of the divine being but principally through religious deeds (one's own prayers and pilgrimage) and the strong expression of human love (*affaires de coeur*). The agent of salvation is changed from Buddha's merciful and compassionate love to the self-absorbed passion of the couple.

The final death scene of the tragic play, "a painful, heart-rendering sight" (51), is the moment of

most joyous ecstasy. It is the moment that shows how Chikamatsu deals with the eternal themes of love and death. It is a demonstration of that which is at once the most blessed of consummations and the most pious act of self-annihilation. In addition, it is also the moment when, in the words of W. B. Yeats, “a terrible beauty is born” (“Easter, 1916”). Though this may seem sentimental, beauty is not, in fact, the handmaid of goodness and truth, and this is the essence of a Chikamatsu tragedy. In his Romanticism, Chikamatsu, the Romantic dramatist, idealizes love’s consummation in death.

The closing lines of the play comprise Chikamatsu’s eulogy for Ohatsu and Tokubei. The tone is restrained and subdued, but quietly moving. The narrator concludes the tragic love story with the following eulogy:

No one is there to tell the tale, but the wind that blows through Sonezaki Wood transmits it, and high and low alike gather to pray for these lovers who beyond a doubt will in the future attain Buddhahood. They have become models of true love. (56)

This final verdict on the ill-fated lovers recalls the last paragraph of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), another “*liebestod*” story.

This is Chikamatsu’s eulogy for the ill-fated couple’s love’s consummation in death. Certainly, they are a paragon of all lovers. After the “*michiyuki*” sequence Tokubei is no more “a weakling hero” (Kneene 15); he ceases the whining of a sore loser. They are going to die together as true lovers. At the end of *Romeo and Juliet* the two families agree to end their feud and decide to erect statues of gold. The Capulets will erect a statue of Romeo and the Montagues will erect one of Juliet. Though there is no monument of gold for Ohatsu and Tokubei, their name will go down in history as an example for all lovers. “*Shinju*” indeed came to assume a new meaning. It is no longer a disreputable way of dying. In Chikamatsu’s cult of double suicide we find an esoteric theme, i.e., what Northrop Frye saw in *Romeo and Juliet*: “the theme of love at once bound up with, and part of, violent death” (16).

It is often said that there are no shortcuts to Nirvana. However, *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* teaches that there is indeed such a shortcut. The climactic scene of the play is the violent act of self-annihilation accompanied by the chanting of the sutra “*Namu Amida*” as a kind of incidental music. It is at once the most intense expression of piety and the most blessed consummation of “love death.” Nirvana can be reached through suicidal murder. This demonstrates Chikamatsu’s revolutionary interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. To put it another way, Kwannon worship among the common people is thus fused with double suicide as the foundation for Chikamatsu’s Romanticism.

8. Conclusion

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is said to be “one of the world’s best-loved stories” (Frye 29). Chikamatsu’s first double suicide play, a pathetic love story about Ohatsu and Tokubei, has also endured more than 300 years as a romantic ideal. Chikamatsu identifies love with death itself in its painful no less than its joyous aspect, as is shown so clearly in Ohatsu’s words. Her feeling of euphoria is expressed in the midst of the tragic catastrophe: “Kill me, kill me quickly!” (56), expressing the agonies inflicted on her by Tokubei as a prelude to their ultimate embrace, an image which fuses sexual ecstasy and

extinction. Tokubei, stabbing Ohatsu to death with a dagger, is giving her the *coup de grâce*, as it were, an act of love, an act that brings her supreme ecstasy.

The Love Suicides at Sonezaki is another variation of the theme of “*liebestod*,” and Tokubei would concur with Romeo who says, “Death is amorous” (5.3.103). Believing in Amida Buddha and eternal love after death, to die together is to partake of eternal bliss. Tokubei goes to the Pure Land of Happiness led by Ohatsu. For the protagonist of the play, his beloved turns out to be another incarnation of Kwannon, the goddess of mercy. When all is said and done, *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* is a paean to the saving grace of woman.

Notes

1. Though *Wikipedia* may not be considered entirely reputable, I was unable to find a satisfactory definition of “*liebestod*” in standard literary reference books, including J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, rev. ed. (Andre Deutsch, 1979), Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (OUP, 2008) and Dinah Birch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th ed. (OUP, 2009). “*Liebestod*” has apparently not entered the regular English literary vocabulary.
2. All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
3. *The Passionate Pilgrim* is a miscellany of poems by various authors, known and unknown, collected and published in 1599 by William Jaggard. Its title page reads: “The Passionate Pilgrim. By W. Shakespeare. At London. Printed for W. Iaggard, and are to be sold by W. Leake, at the Greyhound in Paules Churchyard. 1599.”
4. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (OUP, 2005) explains “Nirvana” as follows: “a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self, and the subject is released from the effects of karma and samsara. It represents the final goal of Buddhism.”

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