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*The Love Suicide at Amijima*

A Study of a Japanese  
Domestic Tragedy by  
Chikamatsu Monzaemon

Donald H. Shively



CENTER FOR JAPANESE STUDIES  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Donald H. Shively

Center for Japanese Studies  
The University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

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DONALD H. SHIVELY

*Berkeley, California*  
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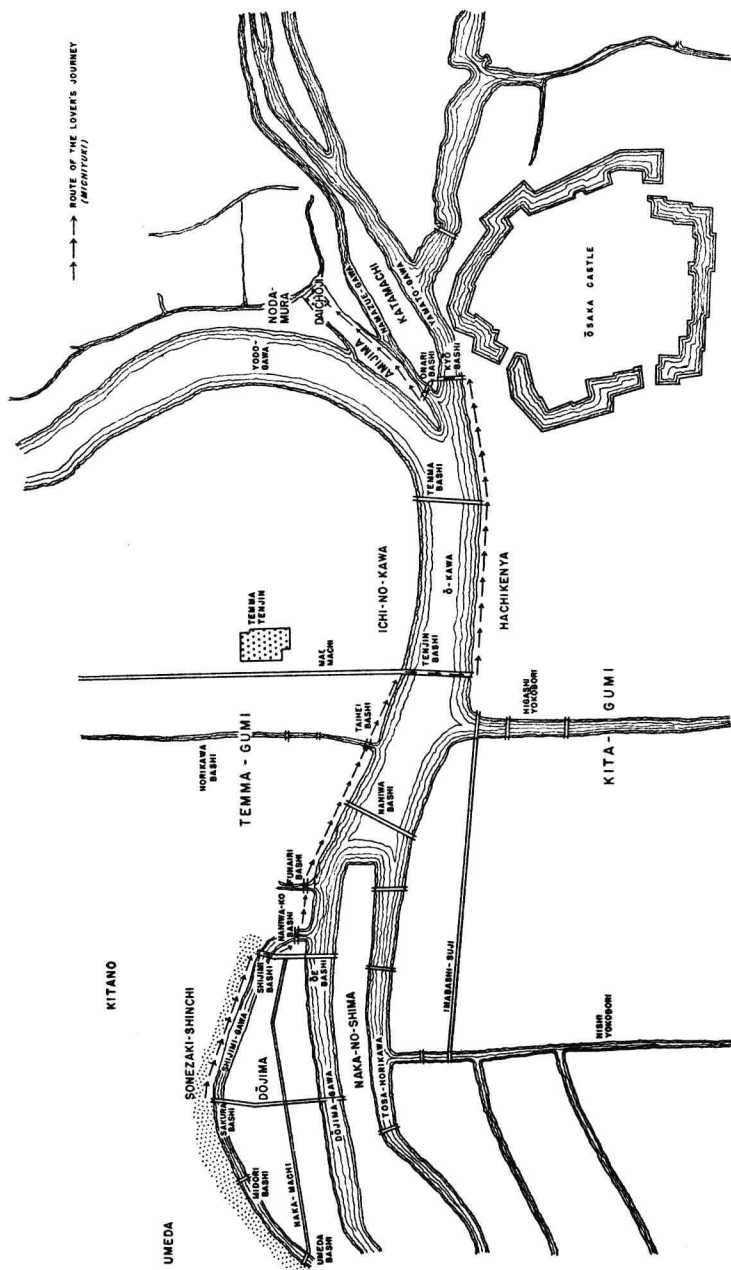
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# **Introduction**



SHOWING PLACES MENTIONED IN SHINJŪ TEN NO AMIJIMA



# Introduction

## 1. *The Theater in the Culture of the Osaka Townsmen*

The leading playwright of the Japanese popular drama movement which began in the opening years of the seventeenth century was Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725). Of his many plays none is better known today than *The Love Suicide at Amijima* (*Shinjū Ten no Amijima*). Written in 1720, it is a mature work of his late years and is considered by modern Japanese scholars to be the finest example of his domestic plays, or *sewamono*, a form which is largely his invention.<sup>1</sup> The esteem in which this work is held in the history of Japanese literature is indicated by the fact that there have been more commentaries written on this than on any other play.

The plot concerns the ill-conceived love of the young owner of a paper store, a married man with children, and a prostitute. The lovers, unable to extricate themselves from their family and professional obligations so that they may marry, escape the unsympathetic world by seeking death in a double suicide.

Westerners who read this play will find some aspects of it to be of merit. The dramatization is often skillful. The plot as a whole is well integrated, and the details of the story are unfolded in a natural manner. Unexpected complications in the course of events hold the reader's attention; variety of action sustains the pace. The flow of events seems logical, and the main characters have a tragic quality. In fact, the social and ethical dilemma of the lovers, if abstracted out of their particular cultural environment, seems to deal with a universal experience.

Yet the Western reader may be at a loss to understand why the play or its author has gained quite such recognition in Japan. He finds that in translation the style is undistinguished, and he may feel that the characters are inadequately delineated, the moral con-

flict is meaningless, and the suicide unnecessary. He will probably be more convinced that the play does not merit serious attention when he learns that it was written for the puppet theater, and that in the last two centuries it has been performed only after the most extensive rewriting.

The Westerner who is critical of this play is perhaps correct in the opinion that *Ten no Amijima* is not a work of universal appeal. However, this is not to deny that it deserves its position of esteem in Japanese literature. The very fact that it has markedly less appeal to a Western than to a Japanese reader enhances its importance for the study of comparative literature. The play is appreciated by the Japanese for special characteristics of style, content, and form which are unfamiliar to the Western reader. It is the product of a culture radically different from Western cultures, and its merits can be appreciated only after the most elaborate explanations. The elements of literary style, such as meter, word-plays, and allusions, are much more thoroughly swept away in translation from Japanese than they would be if translated from an Indo-European language. Another barrier to understanding the play is the social environment, the social and moral conflicts, which made it more poignant for the Japanese audience of two centuries ago than for modern Japanese. To understand the play we must also be aware of special conventions of the Japanese drama which conditioned it, and the peculiar requirements of the puppet theater which it had to meet. At the risk of doing some violence to appreciation of the play as a work of art, it will be subjected in this Introduction to such analysis as will show the specific ways in which the play is a product of its particular environment. Our first consideration then will be the culture of the Osaka townsmen and the theater that developed in it.

The *Genroku*, the era name for the years 1688–1704, refers more broadly to the cultural period from about 1680 to the 1740's. This was a time of unprecedented prosperity in the cities, of extraordinary productivity in the development of new popular forms of literature and art. It followed upon the establishment of internal peace and a form of centralized political control at the opening of the seventeenth century. The first three shogun, or military overlords, of the Tokugawa family had evolved an intricate system of political and social control which ran largely on its own momentum through the two and a half centuries (1600–1867) of the Tokugawa period. During the *Genroku* period the authority

of this central government was unchallenged at home, and was free of threats from abroad. The old problems seemed to have been settled, and the new ones were yet to develop significant proportions; thus the administration had no concerns more serious than matters of finance and succession.

Domestic peace and a stable political structure were propitious for those interdependent developments which contributed to the expansion of the economy—the improvement of the transportation system, the increased circulation of commodities, the growth of a money economy, the formation of rice exchanges and credit houses, and a rising standard of living for all classes. In this rapidly developing economy, it was the commercial centers, the cities, which gained the greatest benefits, and much of the wealth of the nation passed into the hands of the merchants. They made large profits by government contracts for construction projects, for transporting commodities, and for reminting. They made even more money by speculation in rice and other products, by wholesaling monopolies, and by lending money to the feudal lords and members of the samurai class.

The center of the new urban culture was the city of Osaka, which dominated the commercial world as the transportation entrepôt and the location of the rice exchange. It had risen to importance in the sixteenth century when it outstripped the port of Sakai which neighbored it to the south.<sup>2</sup> For several generations from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century it held a clear preëminence as the center of urban life over the two larger cities which had a population of over half a million.<sup>3</sup> Heian, the modern Kyoto, the ancient Imperial capital and center of traditional culture, was too steeped in its past glories to live fully in the present. Edo, the modern Tokyo, the effective political center of the nation as the headquarters of the Tokugawa administration, was in the process of being built, and its townsmen were still rather stifled by its rustic provincialism and military atmosphere. The chief characteristic of Osaka which distinguished it from the other two was that it was predominantly a commercial city. Under the Toyotomi family it had a brief career as a political and military center, until the fall of Osaka Castle in 1615. In the years that followed, the Tokugawa strove to gain the favor of the inhabitants by the remission of taxes and by public works, such as developing the canal system.<sup>4</sup> Osaka Castle was reconstructed as a bastion of Tokugawa power against any uprising of the feudal lords of southwest Japan,

but it was not needed for this purpose until the middle of the nineteenth century; ~~during the Genroku period the Castle did not cast a shadow over the civilian character of the city. Those samurai stationed in Osaka who were not in the Castle garrison were more commercial than military, since they were on duty at the commercial offices which the various feudal lords had established in Osaka to market the rice and other products of their fiefs.~~

It is not surprising that, at this center of commercial activity, the Osaka townsmen (*chōnin*) developed the most pronounced bourgeois spirit in Japan. Under a system of corporate responsibility they had a measure of management of their own affairs. They were responsible to a commissioner from the central government, the *machi bugyō*, for carrying out the instructions and requirements of the central government. Although the townsmen had no real opportunity for participation in political life, they were actually freer in the ordering of their lives and the conduct of their business than any other class in Japan.

By the time of the Genroku period the actual position of the Osaka townsmen was very different from their theoretical status in the Tokugawa social order. The feudal overlords, influenced by Confucian ideas of the functions and productivity of the occupations, had decreed a four-class hierarchy which placed the samurai or official class at the top, the farmers second, the artisans third, and the merchants fourth. This system did not take economic status into consideration. In the course of the economic expansion of the seventeenth century the Osaka merchants became wealthy, and the townsmen as a whole—merchants and artisans—were comparatively prosperous.<sup>5</sup> It is true that they had little opportunity for participation in politics or for social advancement, but anything that money could buy was theirs. Their energy and wits were channeled into making money and spending it, and these became the great satisfactions in life.

The prosperity of the townsmen created a demand for forms of entertainment and art to meet their tastes and interests. It led to the development of gay quarters in the cities, where they could divert themselves in the restaurants, brothels, and bathhouses. It led to the development of new literary genres and new forms of drama, music, and dance. Their tastes brought forth new schools of painting, the development of the techniques of multicolored

woodblock prints, and advances in the crafts of the weaver and the dyer.

All of these forms reflected the buoyant spirit of the townsmen, their lack of restraint and their verve. They contrasted sharply with the simplicity of the traditional forms of entertainment and art of the samurai, who considered the culture of the upstart townsmen plebeian, gaudy, and often immoral. Yet the samurai often were attracted by its excitement and fell under its spell. In subject matter, the bourgeois art bore a closer relation to actual life than did the art of the higher classes. The new literary genres and the domestic plays dealt with the social and moral problems of the townsmen. The paintings and woodblock prints took as subject matter scenes of their daily life, often in the gay quarter. The music of the three-stringed samisen and the drama recitations caught the tempo of their energetic, emotional lives. The patterns of their clothes and the woodblock prints reflected their love of bold color and design.

This tendency of *chōnin* art to represent actual conditions of life in rather graphic terms was in part the result of its origin as popular art of a class with but rudimentary education. However, it was more than a literal-mindedness, for it also reflected intellectual changes in Japan. Coincidentally with the rise of the merchant class in the early seventeenth century, the otherworldliness of the Buddhist outlook was giving way among the educated to the more practical social ethic of Confucianism. Concepts of legal procedure were becoming dominant in business as in feudal relations. The increase of commerce contributed to the growth of a mentality among the townsmen which placed importance on facts and figures. In the world of business, abstract concepts seemed of less utility. The practical, impatient townsmen found classical culture too antiquarian, too restrained, too profound. In the forms of art and literature as modified to meet the taste of the townsmen, there was a trend from the romantic toward the realistic, from the historical to the everyday.

This is exemplified by the three literary genres which developed during the seventeenth century: the haiku or seventeen-syllable poems, the ukiyo-zōshi or short stories, and the popular plays.

The *haiku* (or *hokku*) as a simple, terse poetic form appealed to the townsmen. It derived from classical forms but was simplified

and had been freed of most of the scholastic rules of prosody and restrictions on subject matter. The composing of *haiku* and the related form of "chain poems" (*haikai renga*) became popular pastimes and the object for social gatherings and contests. They were often as much games, however, as art forms, games in which humor, nimbleness of wit, or quantity of production were appreciated more than aesthetic quality.<sup>6</sup>

A literary form even more representative of the townsmen is the short story of Ibara Saikaku (1642–1693) and those he influenced, such as Nishizawa Ippū (1665?–1731). ~~These men delighted in describing the life of townsmen of all professions. With keen humor and sharp insights they described how merchants made their fortunes and squandered them. They reported in greatest detail on life in the gay quarters and gave the full particulars of recent love suicides. The terse and witty style of this prose, like the subject matter, suggests the tempo of *chōnin* life.~~

The content of Chikamatsu's plays shows a similar trend from classical materials to those of the contemporary world dealt with in the short stories. In literary style they were similar to contemporary prose, and were characteristic of *chōnin* culture in the rhythm of the language, the bombast, and the emotionalism. The two types of theater for which he wrote were developed specifically for *chōnin* taste, and contrasted in form and treatment with the classical theater. The *kabuki* and the *ningyō jōruri*, or puppet theater, both products of the seventeenth century, are so interrelated by cross influences in their development that they must be considered together.

That the *kabuki* theater is a characteristic product of *chōnin* culture can be seen in its points of contrast to the classical *nō* drama and *kyōgen* farces of the Muromachi period (1336–1568). Like many of the townsmen's arts, it emerged from a crude, plebeian medium, and was elevated by borrowings from a classical art form of the upper classes. Its rudimentary beginnings were in shrine dances and mimes, but it was the *nō* which supplied many of the elements that made it a dramatic form. The plots of most early *kabuki* were taken from the *nō* texts (*yōkyoku*) or from that corpus of military stories (*gunki monogatari*) on which the *nō* drew so heavily. The *michi-yuki*, or poetic journey of the *nō* plays, became a regular feature of the *kabuki*. Its dances and posturing were influenced by the *nō*, and the style of recitation and early techniques and terminology of staging were borrowed from it.

However, in its spirit and tempo it is as different from the *nō* as the Tokugawa townsman was from the Muromachi warrior. In contrast to the subtlety and restraint of the *nō*, the action of the *kabuki* is direct, the language bombastic, and the movements exaggerated. Historical events are unfolded in lively action on the stage, instead of being narrated in retrospect by a priest or the spirit of a samurai. The impersonal recitation in poetic diction which characterizes *nō* is supplanted in the *kabuki* by extensive use of dialogue, in rough and ready language. During the last decade of the seventeenth century, the introduction of the domestic plays about contemporary occurrences in the townsmen class made *kabuki* even more representative of *chōnin* culture. At the same time the use of more elaborate sets and staging techniques and the development of more mature acting styles began.

The early *kabuki* had developed certain characteristics, especially in acting styles, which restricted its potentiality as a serious art medium; this was probably an important reason why the puppet theater was able to rise to such popularity and compete with it during the Genroku period. The *kabuki* is said by tradition to have originated in 1603 with the appearance in Kyoto of Okuni, who was evidently a renegade Shinto priestess.<sup>7</sup> Her suggestive dances attracted notice, and her performances were provided with some plot content by her lover, Nagoya Sanzaburō (or Nagoya Sanzō), who outlined farces for her from his knowledge of *nō* and *kyōgen*. In many of the *kabuki* troupes which soon appeared the women's roles were played by men, and the men's roles by women, providing the opportunity for a great deal of indecent pantomime. The acting and dancing was often calculated to advertise the actors' and actresses' secondary profession of prostitution. It is not surprising, then, that the *kabuki* theaters were established next to the gay quarter. The central government, deploring the immorality of the *kabuki* theater, began to place prohibitions on it as early as 1608. There were some troupes composed entirely of women, who performed *onna kabuki*, or "women *kabuki*." But the impersonation of men by women was considered to be especially disruptive of public morals, and women were banned from the stage in 1629, an order which remained in force for over two centuries.<sup>8</sup>

Even before this prohibition, at least as early as 1617, there was an all-male theater, known as the *wakashū kabuki*, or "young men *kabuki*," which was connected with homosexual prostitution. This type of drama was banned intermittently, notably in 1642. It con-



tinued without serious interference after 1652 when certain superficial reforms were made to satisfy the authorities. An example of these changes was the requirement that the boys who played female roles shave their forelocks in conformity with the masculine fashion. In compensation, the practice soon arose of wearing a purple cloth cap over the shaved portion to simulate the appearance of women's coiffure. In this modified form, known as *yarō kabuki*, or "fellow *kabuki*," the emphasis was still on sex rather than on art, as is abundantly illustrated by the *yarō hyōbanki*, the critical booklets rating the boy actors, which stressed their physical appeal more than their dramatic skill. It was probably not until the 1680's that art began to take precedence over sex in *kabuki* acting, with the development of new styles by Arashi San'emon (1635-1690) and Sakata Tōjūrō (1647-1709).<sup>9</sup> For some time, however, the actors continued to be idolized by the townsmen public as much for their appearance as for their acting.

The excessive popularity of the actors also inhibited in another way the development of *kabuki* into a mature drama form. The individual actor confined himself to a type of role in which he felt he excelled and demanded of the playwright a vehicle which would suit his style and rhetorical declamations which would utilize his voice to its best advantage. ~~The written text (*kyakuhon*) was sometimes little more than an outline on which the actor improvised, and in most cases the actor's whims took precedence over the structure of the plot.~~ This was such a restricting medium for the able writer that many of them, like Chikamatsu, turned more and more to writing *jōruri* for the puppet theater, where their literary talents would have fuller scope.

*Jōruri*, a style of recitation used in narrating certain romances,<sup>10</sup> began to be used to accompany the performance of puppets at the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> About the same time the three-stringed *samisen*<sup>12</sup> was substituted for the *biwa* as an accompaniment to *jōruri* recitation. With the development of the puppet theater, *jōruri* came to mean the style of recitation used for puppet plays, and hence the plays themselves.

This puppet *jōruri* grew rapidly in popular favor and on certain occasions was even performed for the Imperial Court, the Tokugawa shogun, and many of the feudal lords, at a time when *kabuki* was held in contempt by the upper classes. Dozens of competing styles of *jōruri* recitation were evolved in Osaka, Kyoto, and Edo, but the style which was ultimately to overshadow the others