Love in Edo Literature

Paul Gordon SCHALOW
Rutgers University

Every literary culture has invented a poetics of love whereby romance is structured discursively in ways that are consistent with the socio-sexual constructs of society. The task that has concerned many students of literature has been to describe in some systematic way an overarching poetics of love that can explain differences in the way love stories are told from culture to culture. This essay identifies several archetypical differences between Japanese and European depictions of love, most importantly the European use of "devoted (paired) lovers" and the Japanese use of "superior (lone) lovers" as the dominant figures around which the love story is structured. It then shows how the emergence of "devoted (paired) lovers" as a contesting discursive model in Japanese literature was linked to the depiction of male homosexual love. The essay concludes that incorporating the powerful current of male homosexual love into literary discourse had profound consequences for the poetics of love in Edo literature.

One of the most prominent features of European literature has been the presence of depictions of pairs of "devoted lovers," such as Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, or Tristan and Isolde. All are stories about a couple, a man and a woman, caught up in an emotional and erotic attachment which, in its most extreme form, culminates in death. Yet surveying the landscape of love in Japanese literature, such pairs of lovers are virtually absent, except perhaps in *Heike monogatari* where leave-taking between husband and wife is given considerable romantic dimension. It would seem that the devoted couple is just not a particularly significant or central form for structuring the love story in Japan. Instead, Japanese literature is populated with "superior lovers," lone men and women, who are known individually for the intensity or sophistication of their love. Among the personae that come immediately to mind are the hero based on Arihara no Narihira of *Ise monogatari,* Genji of *Genji monogatari,* so-called "passionate poetesses" such as Ono no Komachi or Izumi Shikibu, Ihara Saikaku's Yonosuke in *Kôshoku ichidai otoko,* or the nameless female protagonist in *Kôshoku ichidai onna.* In each case, though we know that each character is central to a story of great love, no specific partner links itself to the name in the manner of say, Antony and Cleopatra. "Genji and Murasaki," or "Izumi Shikibu and Sochi no Miya (Prince Atsumichi)," are somehow just not eqivalent. The greatness of "superior love" is not proven in a devoted partnership, but in responding to a number of partners; variety itself proves the superior Japanese lover's knowledge of love, unlike the male-female couples of European literature

whose mutual devotion proves their love.

Another important feature that differs in the Japanese and European poetics of love is the concept of the potential for achieving perfect love. In European culture, there is an underlying sense of the prefectability of love. Perfect love is available, in a spiritual sense, from God; it is religious faith that directs the flow of divine love into human lives. The 14th century Christian mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich, recorded in *The Revelation of Divine Love* her longing for God's perfect love. Other monastics such as St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila wrote similar meditations in which they achieved perfect love in mystical relations with God. The belief in human access to perfect spiritual love affects male-female relations in European society, in that human relationships are forever shadowed by the promise of perfection in love. This promise is integral to the poetics of love in the European love story, where perfection is the standard by which devoted lovers are judged. The Japanese case is entirely different, however. In Buddhism, sexual love is one of humankind's most persistent delusions. Unlike the Christian God, the Buddha cannot serve as a partner in divine love, but provides a mirror for self-reflection and eventual enlightenment into love's imperfect nature. Bonds of love are unwelcome because they always lead to emtional suffering; perfection in love is *a priori* impossible.

An important feature of the poetics of love in Europe is the tendancy to structure romance as a quest. In contrast, Japanese literature structures romance not as a search, but as an opportunity to respond.[1] *Nasake* is actually responsive love, so it concerns itself with the quality of feeling, not a resulting situation, such as a so-called "happy marriage" or "tragic end" arising from that response. The "devoted lover" of European literature is judged by the success of his quest for achieving perfection; the pleasure in reading such a love story comes from the success or failure of the quest. The "superior lover" of Japanese literature, on the other hand, is judged by his mastery of love's moment. In *Ise monogatari,* Arihara no Narihira masters the moment; In *Heichûmonogatari,* Taira no Sadabumi bungles the moment, and therein lies the pleasure of the text.

The reason for these differences in the two literary traditions lies in the choices made within the literary cultures of Japan and Europe over a period of centuries regarding how to tell a love story. Those choices are largely based on the psycho-sexual structures shaping people within the social world which determine what literary forms are most compelling or satisfying to a given group of people, readers and writers both, at a given point in time. The fact that the devoted couple is a romantic ideal in European literature, while the superior individual is a romantic ideal in Japanese literature, is an aesthetic choice derived from literary responses to different social and psychological structures.

To elaborate: In the monogamous Christian framework that structured heterosexual life among the literate classes from the middle ages on in Europe, mutual devotion of a male-female couple came to be idealized; thwarted love likewise became a powerful literary theme in such a context, as did two main subversive models that deviated from the ideal: the model of adulterous love, based on the myth of Tristan; and the model of seductive love, based on

the myth of Don Juan. Both adulterous and seductive love stood against the monogamous ideal, and perhaps for that reason were associated with death. These models of heterosexual love (romantic, adulterous, and seductive) constitute the archetypical forms of love in a European poetics of love. A third possible challenge to the monogamous ideal, sodomy, was invested with such stigma that its presence in literature is allowed only in hidden or repressed form. The suppression of homosexual love within the literary poetics of love is based on Christian ideas of sexual morality that legitimate heterosexual love for purposes of reproduction and make the man-woman couple the only proper form of sexual behavior.

In contrast to Christianity in Europe, Japanese Buddhism affirms no form of sexual love as normative: if anything, male-female relations are the most problematic form of sexual bond, for they not only involve sensual delusion but lead to the birth of children, thereby creating further unwanted bonds to the world for the individual and serving to perpetuate in the human species the cycle of attachment and delusion. For all practical purposes, heterosexual and homosexual relations in the Buddhist framework are on an equally negative footing. This explains why romantic love in Japanese literature is never exclusive of homeroticism. Similarly, homosexuality is never subversive or threatening in Japanese depictions of love, because it was never demonized as sodomy was in European literature.

The first surviving lover-persona in Japanese literature is the Narihira persona in *Ise monogatari*, and there you see the first clear outline of the shape of a Japanese poetics of love: the 'man of old' loves widely and well, and it is his susceptibility to love, and the susceptibility of others to his beauty and charm, that makes him a superior lover. The episodic structure of the narrative reinforces the emphasis on love's moment and its immediate emotional consequences. In no sense is his a quest for perfect love with one woman, or even with many women. Rather, the proof of superior love lies in its simple intensity, its repetition and variation, not in its ultimate destination. One aspect of the *Ise* hero that is rarely acknowledged is the presence in several episodes of the hero's male friend, referred to as *uruwashiki tomo*. The presence of the intimate male friend in *Ise monogatari* reflects the fact that male intimacy was an integral part of the Japanese poetics of love; it was not repressed or demonized as sodomy had been in Europe.[2]

The *Kokinshû*, and its sequencing of love poems in chapters 11-15, depicted the next great superior lover, not as an individual persona, but as a collective poetic abstraction. As Earl Miner has commented, the *Kokinshû* ideal of love privileges female experience, and is based on the assumption that the woman's experience is closer to the truth of love. Poems are sequenced to tell a tale of the ideal love affair: from its inception with verbal and visual stimuli, to yearning for consummation. With hardly any note payed to the physical act of love itself, the sequencing moves quickly to waiting and the desire for further contact, nostalgia for the lover, then anger at abandonment, and finally resignation and regrets for ever having loved. Far from the transcendant dream of satisfaction and happiness or its failure in European literature, the Heian ideal teaches only one truth: the inevitable mutability of love. The fact that reality did not always adhere to the ideal in the lives of individual men and

women indicates that the conventions of depicting love were just that: conventions that resonated in some way with the powerful psychic structures of love, but which could not completely tame love's variety.

Genji monogatari may be said to blend elements of the *Ise* superior lover and the *Kokinshû* ideal. Genji proves his superior knowledge of love through the extraordinary variety and intensity of his feelings, but the lesson is that love threatens to fade, and causes suffering in the process. Though the consequences of love are explored here more fully than in any other work, there are no "devoted lovers" along the lines of European literature, a man and a woman striving in mutual devotion for perfect love. Genji is a "superior lover." One reason for this is that love is inextricably bound up with status in the tale; as the rainy night scene in the Broom Tree chapter makes clear, it is the appeal of women of various statuses that motivates much of the plot movement from lover to lover. The source of this movement lies in Genji's insecurity about his own status, which revolves around his mother's lowly status, problematized when Genji's father exalted her to the position of favorite. Genji lacked the maternal status so necessary for survival at court, and sought in his relations with women to reenact or erase the fact. For that reason, a woman's status situates her in the tale, and determines to a large extent her fate in Genji's life. The highly ranked Lady *Rokujô*, secure in her status, becomes Genji's nemises when treated lightly by him. Murasaki, always insecure about her status, is weakened and eventually expires from her inexpressable anxieties about being displaced in Genji's affections by a young bride, the Third Princess. The emphasis on status in love precludes the type of personal devotion necessary for the love story to be structured around a more purely romantic depiction of love.

In *Genji monogatari,* the theme of acquiring status though love culminates with Genji's marriage to the Third Princess, daughter of his half-brother, the Suzaku Emperor; her bloodlines are impeccable. Her introduction into Genji's *Rokujô* mansion initiates a sequence of events that brings about the destruction of Genji's equilibrium. Interestingly, the source of this unraveling is one of the few clearcut examples of obsessive "devoted love" in the tale: Kashiwagi's illicit love for the Third Princess, leading to the birth of Kaoru. Kashiwagi's desires for the Third Princess are inspired by a glimpse of her figure, and they are transferred to a fetish object, her pet cat. As a "superior lover," Genji has shown himself to be easily persuaded to shift his attention from one woman to another, but not so with Kashiwagi. Kashiwagi's devotion to the Third Princess hints at the possibility of "devoted love" in the Genji, but a balanced pairing necessary for a depiction of "devoted lovers" never occurs. Kashiwagi's devotion thus ends up as mere obsession, and leads not to a mutual resolution of their love, but to unconnected individual resolutions: Kashiwagi's suicide by starvation, and the Third Princess's tonsure.

Besides the Kashiwagi/Third Princess liaison mentioned earlier, there is one other potentially devoted couple in the *Tale of Genji,* emerging in Kaoru's obsession with the Eighth Prince's three daughters, Oigimi, Nakanokimi, and Ukifune, in the final ten "Uji Chapters." But Kaoru's devoted love is not between Kaoru and any of the women, but with their father.

This is because, though Kaoru shares aspects of Genji's need for status, Kaoru's questions concern not maternal status, but his paternity. The Eighth Prince and his daughters are first mentioned to Kaoru in the presence of the former Reizei Emperor, who himself has dealt with the question of paternal identity, since he is known publicly as Genji's brother, but is in fact Genji's son. Reizei, however, knows that his father is Genji and is relatively free of the paternal anxiety Kaoru suffers. Their different reactions to the news of the Eighth Prince are interesting: Reizei responds with questions about the daughters, whereas Kaoru wants to know more about the Eighth Prince himself, and determines to become his religious student and companion. It is only with the Eighth Prince's death, after three years of apprenticeship, that Kaoru first takes note of the sisters, and then only as mementoes of his attachment to the Prince. The shift of his love for the Eighth Prince to Oigimi is, like his father Kashiwagi's for the Third Princess, obsessive; and it leads to a relationship unlike any other in the *Genji,* charged with elements of homoerotic attraction. The homoeroticism extends to the fact that much of Kaoru's outward show of affection is motivated by a rivalry with Niou.

The proof of Kaoru's obsession with Oigimi is his refusal to consummate the sexual act with Nakanokimi after Oigimi tricks him into her sister's bed. This goes against all of the conventions of the depiction of the "superior lover," where the object of the response or its personal identity is insignificant compared to the all-important ability to respond. Niou proves this norm by quickly shifting his attentions from Oigimi to Nakanokimi when the opportunity arises, and he ultimately succeeds in making Nakanokimi his wife. Kaoru's obsessive love seems to be more personal, and when Oigimi realizes this, she determines to die rather than submit to it, and commits suicide by starvation, a masculine act carried out earlier in the tale by Kashiwagi.

It is only after Oigimi's death that Kaoru comes to think, too late, that Nakanokimi is attractive. Nakanokimi is too conventionally feminine to be caught up in the web of Kaoru's need for her father and senses the danger of his obsession; she consciously introduces the name of Ukifune to him as a way to escape it, much as Oigimi had attempted earlier with less success. Ukifune is the final access Kaoru will achieve to the memory of his intimacy with the Eighth Prince; again, the relationship is homoerotic not only in its origins, but in the competition between Kaoru and Niou for access to Ukifune. Ukifune is a blend of Oigimi's masculine qualities and Nakanokimi's feminine qualities. Torn by her desire to fulfill Kaoru's platonic need for her father and her desire for Niou's physical love, she attempts suicide — the normative masculine act of renouncing life. Miraculously, she is saved and takes the tonsure — the normative feminine act of renouncing life. The potential for devoted love exists here for only the second time in the *Genji,* and it derives from homoerotic aspects centering on Kaoru's paternal obsession. All along, the object of Kaoru's love and devotion is the Eighth Prince himself, and his feelings are deflected to the three sisters only after the Prince's death.[3]

Some of the implications of devoted love stemming from homoerotic desire in the *Genji* are developed in 15th-century *chigo monogatari,* or acolyte tales. These were stories centering

on a man-boy couple, a priest and a youth in his care, and they were told within the Buddhist framework of *hosshin mono* or *zange mono,* confessional stories of how love led to Buddhist enlightenment and salvation. The most famous of these *chigo monogatari* was *Aki no yo no nagamonogatari,* "Tale for a Long Autumn Night," and it was widely reprinted and read well into the Edo Period. The romantic love depicted in acolyte tales was taken to its extreme much later in the Ueda Akinari's *Aozukin,* "The Blue Cap," found in his collection *Ugetsu monogatari.* In this story, a priest is so in love with his acolyte that, after the acolyte's death, he continues to make love to the boy's corpse; and after the corpse decomposes to such an extent that it can no longer sustain love-making, the priest eats every scrap of it, including the bones. This would have to be called the ultimate act of two people becoming one, which is what obsessive love is all about, and as grotesque as it may seem, it is an important example of the relationship in Japanese literature between homoeroticism and "devoted love." But, aside from these medieval examples, devoted love remained a latent force and was not an explicit or powerful challenge to depictions of superior love until the Edo Period.

The work that finally crystalized the link between male love and romantic devotion was Ihara Saikaku's *Nanshoku ôkagami* (1687) which depicts male homosexual love relations between samurai men and youths, and between young kabuki actors and their patrons. Saikaku depicted similar relationships in *Buke giri monogatari* and in *Budôdenraiki,* which appeared shortly after *Nanshoku ôkagami.* All three books are part of what has come to be called Saikaku's *buke-bon* period, when he wrote on the topic of samurai life. The depictions of male love in *Nanshoku ôkagami* were structured around the ideal of the 'paragon' or 'model' youth (the *kagami* in the title). Each story depicted a samurai youth or kabuki *wakashû* actor who proved himself to be a "devoted lover" of a man. Saikaku's depiction established a devoted ideal of lovers willing to die for the sake of their love, and it stands as one of the most powerful challenges to the model of the "superior lover." One Japanese scholar, Teruoka Yasutaka, has described the willingness of samurai men and youths to die for the sake of love as a "rebel code," since the only officially sanctioned purpose for a samurai's taking of his life was to protect or uphold the honor of his daimyô lord. Murder or suicide for the sake of personal feelings was strictly illegitimate. In the case of kabuki *wakashû,* the ultimate sacrifice a youth could make for a patron was to renounce the stage for love, and in most cases this meant taking the tonsure and praying for the repose of the man he loved. The ideal of male love was thus represented by a devoted couple, something that had remained latent in Japanese literature until now, and it injected exciting new possibilities into the depiction of the love between men and women in later Edo literature.

The influence of devoted male love on depictions of male-female devoted lovers in Edo literature is most clearly seen in double-suicide (*shinjû*) storeis and plays, in which "devoted love" was linked with death. In an article titled "Love and Death in the Early Modern Novel" (1979), Noguchi Takehiko argues that, romantic love and death were associated in European literature with the heretical myths of Tristan (representing adulterous love) and Don Juan (representing seductive love), but that the linkage of death and devoted love "was realized [in

Japanese literature] in the double-suicide (*shinjû*), a pact between the ordinary man and woman of the streets, completely without relation either to Don Juanism or Tristanism." Noguchi then suggests that love-suicide was linked originally to male love, which he calls the equivalent of courtly love in the European tradition.

If this is true, then Chikamatsu's depictions of love-suicides (*shinjû*) carried out by devoted male-female couples in his *jôruri* and kabuki plays can be interpretated at one level as deriving from Saikaku's earlier *buke-bon* depictions of men and youths dying for the sake of their love. Chikamatsu's pairs of lovers, a man and a woman willing to die together, can be understood in structural terms as a product of gender transferal: samurai youths are transformed to merchant-class women.[4] Reading Saikaku's renderings of the man-boy relationship, one is struck by the demands the lovers place on each other: they must be monogamous, they must resist interlopers, they must prove their loyalty and devotion to each other, by *seppuku* if need be, and under no circumstances were they to value life over masculine honor. Saikaku depicted a man's relationship with a youth as unrealizable with a woman, since women were by definition incapable of manly displays of devotion. Even the tradition of *retsujoden,* biographies of exemplary women, does not suggest the possibility of such a romantic devotion between a man and a woman. But in Chikamatsu's *shinjû* plays, women capable of such devotion come vividly to life, and the devoted couples who die together convincingly challenge the contemporary model of the "superior lover," the *tsû* who dallies expertly with women or youths in the pleasure quarters and kabuki theaters but would never die with one.[5]

Shinjû originated prior to the 17th century as a gesture of devotion, an outward display of "what was in the heart," involving simple acts of self-wounding by a man or a youth to show the sincerity of their feelings; these included writing vows in blood, piercing the flesh on the arms or thighs, cutting the skin, and in extreme cases amputation of a finger. *Shinjû* was a means of giving visible, physical manifestation in the body to the inner secrets of the heart. As such, *shinjû* resembled Western stigmata in that both were bodily signs of an inner experience. Not until the mid-17th century was *shinjû* transformed into an expression of love between a man and a woman. The practice of *shinjû* by women in the pleasure quarter is dealt with in a chapter in Fujimoto Kizan's guide to the pleasure quarters, *Shikidôôkagami* (1678), which was recently translated by Lawrence Rogers in the article "She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not: *Shinjû* and *Shikidôôkagami*" (*Monumenta Nipponica* 49.1, Spring 1994). Rogers quotes Kizan's comment that "To end one's life with a lover is an act of baseness and stupidity. For the most part we cannot but call such people lunatics," a position firmly situated in the tradition of the superior lover. Rogers further notes that: "In Kizan's time the suicide of lovers was apparently not known as *shinjû*, but as *shinjûshi,* or *shinjû* death. In a collection of thirty-eight stories published under the title *Shokoku shinjûonna* in 1686, eight years after *Shikidôôkagami* appeared, only three deal with lovers' double suicide. In 1704, however, a similar book was published titled *Shinjûôkagami.* There are twenty-one episodes in this book and all are stories of lovers' suicides." Now, clearly, a major cultural shift had occurred in the

last decade of the 17th century that caused romantic devotion to reach its ultimate from of expression as the death by suicide of a pair of "devoted lovers."

How can we explain the process of *shinjû*'s transformation from an expression of male homosexual love to an expression of heterosexual love? It resulted primarily from the penetration of samurai norms of behavior — particularly the practice of male love — into townsman society at large. Instead of marginalizing or demonizing male homosexual love, as had been done in Europe, urban residents in Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo confronted and subsumed it into their social and psychological structures. Both men and women were engaged in a process of redefining themselves as creatures capable of samurai qualities, but gender dictated that the transformation affect women and men differently. Men desired to prove themselves capable of carrying out samurai ideals, including the practice of male love, whereas women — especially those in the pleasure quarters — were inspired to prove their love in ways that allowed them to compete with youths. For townsmen, the transformation meant crossing the samurai class boundary, but townswomen had to redefine themselves across the gender boundary as well, proving themselves capable of exhibiting formerly exclusively masculine qualities — as acted out in the male love relationship between a man and a youth — such as honor, devotion, and fealty. Needless to say, such redefinitions of townsman and townswoman ran counter to prevailing Confucian social orthodoxy, and the devoted romantic love it inspired in both men and women was a clear threat to social stability.

Despite the emergence of love stories based on romantic devotion in Saikaku's stories on male love and Chikamatsu's *shinjû* plays, this sort of "devoted (paired) lover" never displaced the "superior (lone) lover" from his preeminent position in the Japanese poetics of love. Being non-normative, devoted love was generally associated with death in Japanese literature, just as the non-normative adulterous love of Tristan and the seductive love of Don Juan were associated with death in European literature. Throughout the Edo period, the true hero of Edo literature would remain the *tsûjin*. Love remained a matter of connoisseurship, based still on the powerful archetypal model of the "superior lover." Looked at in terms of a global literary poetics, the tension between "superior" and "devoted" love in Japanese literature is evidence of a world language of love that determines the special ways love stories differ from one literary culture to another.

Notes

1 The fact that love stories are not structured as a search in Japanese literature may be related to the lack of an "epic," which is the prototype of quest literature in the West.

2 In later ages, the hero of *Ise monogatari* was called *in'yô no kami* (the god of *yin* and *yang*, meaning love between men and women), but this represents a loss of the memory of wholeness. Saikaku was the first to revive this knowledge of love's wholeness when he stated, in the tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Nanshoku ôkagami*, that "Narihira would turn over in his grave if he knew he were being called the god of male-female love." Iwata Jun'ichi, a 20th-century scholar who has studied Japanese *nanshoku* in great detail, identified the *uruwashiki tomo* of *Ise monogatari* as a significant trope in the poetics of

love in Japanese literature.

3 This is almost a perfect replication of Genji's shift from deceased mother Kiritsubo, to Fujitsubo, to Murasaki.

4 In her study of Japanese women's writing, *Daughters of the Moon,* Victoria Vernon points to the female characters of Osan and Koharu in Chikamatsu's *Shinjû ten no Amijima* as models of a new way of depicting women in literature. Osan represented the dutiful wife, Koharu the erotically interesting courtesan. Osan is associated with the institution of the *ie,* household, as wife, mother, daughter; whereas Koharu is associated with the pleasure quarter as courtesan, famous beauty, and lover. Vernon stresses that both are products of the male literary imagination and represent a new dichotomized rendering of the ideal of the feminine. Vernon believes that Chikamatsu's rendering of the feminine remains the archetype for the depiction of women in male writing to this day, and even molds the way women write female characters. I would only add that the romantic relationship depicted in Chikamatsu's work (what Vernon calls "a dichotomized rendering of the feminine") was first depicted between man and youth in Saikaku's writings, and only later transferred to the courtesan.

5 I disagree with Steven Heine's ideological reassessment of *shinjû* in the recent article "Tragedy and Salvation in the Floating World: Chikamatsu's Double Suicide Drama as Millenarian Discourse" (*Journal of Asian Studies* 53.2, May 1994). "... [T]he main aim of *shinjû* is not to express the emotional longings of unfulfilled romance because it is not about love, but first and foremost carries a social message about the loss of money and identity." Ultimately, this millenarian account, though it has its merits, is untennable. While financial loss, social marginalization, and the conflict between honor and human emotion may contribute to the impasse leading to double-suicide, one central fact remains that cannot be ignored: namely, that those conflicts arise only in a context of romantic devotion between lovers. Furthermore, the impasse is resolved not through a suicidal act of despair, but through the lovers' conscious commitment to die together. *Shinjû* is primarily an act of devoted love, and its other dimensions must be relegated to secondary status.