Chikamatsu Monzaemon in Translation

Erik Bray

Japanese 391 G

May 17, 2005
Chikamatsu Monzaemon should need no introduction for scholars and students of classical Japanese literature and culture. As the premier playwright of Edo-period Japan who practically defined the art of *bunraku* puppet theater, he is placed in the triumvirate of great Edo writers that includes the poets Matsuo Bashō and Ihara Saikaku, and is perhaps even more recognizable than Zeami Motokiyo, the godfather of the venerable *nō* theater. Because he is so well recognized among the playwrights of Japan, he is often referred to as “the Shakespeare of Japan.” Though the phrase is often used playfully, no serious scholar would use it sincerely. This is for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the vast difference in the volume of their works. As prolific as Shakespeare was, Chikamatsu was a great deal more so. While all of Shakespeare's works have been translated into Japanese, only relatively few of Chikamatsu's have received any treatment in the West. There are favorites amongst Chikamatsu's works, which have received multiple translations into English with varying degrees of quality, but why has there been so much focus on these few, while so many others have yet to be touched?

Though some scholars have argued that there are several plays that may have involved Chikamatsu in some way, his first recognized canonical work is *Yotsugi Soga* (*The Soga Heir*), first performed in 1683. His first work of great popularity, however, is *Shusse Kagekiyo* (*Kagekiyo Victorious*), first performed in 1685. This was the first *jōruri*1 that Chikamatsu wrote for the great chanter Takemoto Gidayū, whose name later became the generic term for a *jōruri* chanter. Thus, it is this date that scholars have somewhat arbitrarily chosen as the beginning of *shinjōruri*, or “new *jōruri*,” as opposed

---

1 *Jōruri* is a general term for drama that is chanted with musical accompaniment. The most popular type of *jōruri* is *ningyō jōruri*, or “doll” *jōruri*. *Bunraku* is the common modern term for *ningyō jōruri*. From here on the term *jōruri* will refer to *ningyō jōruri*. 

2
to kojōruri, or “old jōruri.” The total list of canonical Chikamatsu plays includes 98 jōruri (24 sewamono or “contemporary pieces” and 74 jidaimono or “period pieces”) and about 40 kabuki and kyōgen plays, though different reports vary slightly on these numbers. Of these, the best known sewamono, the first two of which are shinjū jōruri, or “love suicide” jōruri, are Sonezaki Shinjū (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki, 1703), Shinjū Ten no Amijima (The Love Suicides at Amijima, 1720), and Meido no Hikyaku (The Courier for Hell, 1711). His most popular jidaimono is Kokusen'ya Kassen (The Battles of Coxinga, 1715), and his best-known kabuki is Keisei Hotoke no Hara (The Courtesan at Hotoke no Hara, 1699).

The story of the adoption of Chikamatsu's plays into English begins in 1926, when the earliest collection of translations was released by a Japanese scholar by the name Miyamori Asataro, a professor of English literature at the Oriental University in Tokyo. It contains six translations including Meido no Hikyaku, Shinjū Ten no Amijima, as well as two other sewamono and two jidaimono. While it was pioneering work at the time, for which any later translators of these works are grateful, it is generally considered obsolete and often inaccurate. In the preface to his collection of Chikamatsu translations, Donald Keene explains why Miyamori’s translations are insufficient: “The difficult passages in the texts, including Chikamatsu’s most beautiful descriptions, are generally omitted or mutilated, and the translations bristle with such old-fashioned locutions as ‘Fair words butter no parsnips!’ or ‘Oh, for a bare bodkin!’” Clearly, lines like these exhibit a blatant Shakespearean background that correlates with the title of the

---


No Chikamatsu work would be fully translated and published again until 1951, when the ever prolific Donald Keene translated *Kokusen'ya Kassen*, which was published as *The Battles of Coxinga: Chikamatsu's Puppet Play, Its Background and Importance*, along with extensive annotation and analysis that was extended from his doctoral thesis at Columbia University. Critics point out that before Keene, “there was not a single annotated, or for that matter, even a careful translation of a complete work of [Chikamatsu's] literature.”

It also includes what was at the time the most in-depth scholarship on jōruri in general, though as the focus is primarily on *The Battles of Coxinga*, it does not have much to say on Chikamatsu's other works or how they compare to it. Though not without its faults, it is still an excellent translation, indicating of an illustrious career to come.

The next complete treatment of a Chikamatsu play was Donald Shively's 1953 translation of *Shinjū Ten no Amijima*, a good choice for the next introduction of Chikamatsu to Western readers, rendering the Miyamori translation obsolete. Since most of its audience would have been unfamiliar with the social conditions of Edo-period Osaka, or what exactly drove the popularity of love suicides at the time, Shively includes a good deal of accurate background information. Though it is hampered by numerous unfortunate minor errors, such as the misspelling of the eponymous Amijima on the included map, the translation itself is quite accurate and true to the original text, and


6 Ibid, 276.
includes extensive annotation and commentary.  

In 1955, Keene returned to Chikamatsu with his early version of Sonezaki Shinjū, which was included in an anthology edited by Keene. More significant, however, is Keene’s magnum opus of Chikamatsu translations, *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, published in 1961. Many of the translations in *Major Plays* are considered the most accurate translations of those plays and have generally not been topped, nor has there been interest in attempting to do so. It contains updated versions of Keene’s previous translations of Kokusen’ya Kassen and Sonezaki Shinjū, as well as Keene’s own version of Shinjū Ten no Amijima. It would be unfair to compare Shively’s and Keene’s versions of Amijima, as they serve different purposes—Shively’s translation is meant as a scholarly study of Amijima, and is more useful than Keene’s as such. Keene’s translation, however, is meant for a more popular audience, and is a work of literature in of itself. Due to its high readability and modernity, it is still read today by most any student of Japanese literature and is usually what is taught as an introduction to Chikamatsu. Major Plays also includes the first full English translation of Meido no Hikyaku since Miyamori’s now outdated version from 1926. The contrast is quite stark—while Miyamori’s translation is certainly readable, it is less of a translation than an adaptation. It is makes no attempt at a word for word translation as Keene does, and it leaves out countless details. Also made obsolete in *Major Plays* is Miyamori’s translation of Hakata Kojorō Namimakura (*The Girl from Hakata, or Love at Sea*, 1719). Finally, it introduces for the first time in English six other sewamono, maintaining, with

---

the exception of *Kokusen’ya Kassen*, an Edo period setting, which might help prevent readers from getting confused by various different historical settings. It is clear, however, why *Kokusen’ya Kassen* is also included—not only because Keene had spent so much time studying it, but also because in its time it was Chikamatsu’s most popular work, with an initial run lasting seventeen months.

Finally, no discussion of the translation of Chikamatsu into English would be complete without bringing up the recent contributions of Andrew Gerstle. First worth noting is *Circles of Fantasy*, his 1986 treatise on the conventions and content of Chikamatsu’s plays. Gerstle analyzes Chikamatsu and other, more general dramaturgical aspects of *jōruri* from a purely Japanese perspective, rather than through insufficient comparisons to Western drama. Though like any scholarly work it is not without uncontested points, it is considered a valuable resource—a pioneering work beyond the scope of previously published studies relating to Chikamatsu.⁹

In 2001, Gerstle brought to the table his own translations of Chikamatsu plays in *Chikamatsu: 5 Late Plays*, in which he chooses to focus primarily on the as of then underrepresented *jidaimono* of Chikamatsu. There are four *jidaimono*, three of which are in the English language for the first time. The fourth, *Kanhashū Tsunagi Uma* (*Tethered Steed and the Eight Provinces of Kantō*, 1724), Chikamatsu’s final play, deprecates the previous translation by Miyamori. The fifth translation included is of *Shinjū Yoigōshin* (*Love Suicides on the Eve of the Kōshin Festival*, 1722), Chikamatsu’s last *sewamono*. These translations present, for the first time to a Western audience, Chikamatsu’s later career, in which he tended to mix the themes and styles of his

---

sewamono with the historical settings of his jidaimono. Each translation has its own introduction of much greater scope than the introductions given in Major Plays. They are useful for new readers who might be unfamiliar with the themes and historical settings of each play, and are especially welcomed in the jidaimono, which generally require more historical background to follow than the sewamono.

One other unique feature of Gerstle’s translations is the inclusions of the inclusion of translations of the fushizuke that line the original manuscripts, which most translators ignore. These fushizuke, or “tune marks,” consist of various abstract rhythm markers, as well as Chinese characters for technical terms for whether a section should be sung or spoken, or what kind of voice and cadence should be used, such as “rough melody” or “low pitch.” These marks are followed by the tayū, the chanter who performs the entire jōruri, in order achieve the exact dramatic effect desired by Chikamatsu. Gerstle inserts translations of these marks in parentheses before the words that they appear next to in the original texts, giving a better sense of how the play should be read.

Though not in English, also certainly worth noting is the Herculean efforts of French scholar René Sieffert. In 1991 he released his epic four-volume tome, Les Tragédies Bourgeoises, which contains translations of twenty-four Chikamatsu plays, many of which have not been translated into English. Perhaps, depending on their quality, a shortcut to getting some of those plays in English would be to just translate Sieffert’s translations. At the very least, they would be useful resources for someone trying to translate, for example, Imamiya no Shinjū (The Love Suicides at Imamiya, 1711). One would just have to be able to read French, or have access to a French-literate

---

partner willing to help with such a project.

Although Japanese interest in Shakespeare goes back to the Meiji period, it was not until 1911 that the great author and scholar Tsubouchi Shōyō completed his translation of *Hamlet*. This was the first complete, published translation of Shakespeare in Japan. In 1922 he completed the entire Shakespeare canon of thirty-seven plays, which have since been translated several more times. By the 1950’s most any Japanese student of English literature was interested in one of two things: modern fiction, or Shakespeare.\(^{11}\) It would be safe to say that by that point Shakespeare was the “Shakespeare of Japan.” In an informal survey of five Japanese college students, all five were able to name three Shakespeare plays, while not one was able to name three Chikamatsu plays. Chikamatsu’s plays are simply not well-read, even in his home country. Makoto Ueda posits, “Perhaps ninety-five of one hundred Japanese have heard of his name, yet there may be only five or six who have actually read him. Shakespeare is read, at any rate, in high schools and colleges in America; Chikamatsu, because of his free use of colloquialism, never appears in Japanese textbooks.”\(^{12}\)

Where, then, did the phrase “Shakespeare of Japan” even come from with regards to Chikamatsu? Keene suggests that, “In the late nineteenth century, when Japanese first became aware of the glories of Western literature, they felt impelled to discover a ‘Japanese Shakespeare.’ Their unanimous choice for this honor was Chikamatsu Monzaemon…an unfortunate identification from which Chikamatsu’s reputation in the West has suffered since.”\(^{13}\) There is no doubt that the two master playwrights shared

\(^{11}\) Peter Milward, “Teaching Shakespeare in Japan,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Spring, 1974): 228-229.


\(^{13}\) Keene, *Major Plays*: 1.
certain similarities: They are both well known for their tragedies, they both offer unique looks at life in their respective parts of the world and time periods, and they both wrote for popular audiences. However, given any two playwrights it is possible to find similar superficial overlaps, and thus they are merely incidental.

The differences, however, can be more interesting. While Chikamatsu did write for kabuki, which is somewhat more similar to a Shakespearean drama (at least in that it uses live actors, if nothing else), it is of course Chikamatsu’s bunraku puppet plays for which he is famed. There are a number of ways in which writing for jōruri makes Chikamatsu’s literary value different. The writers of texts for jōruri have different demands put on them than those who write for normal actors. For example, the main “actor” in a jōruri is the tayū, who chants the entire play. Jōruri texts are therefore often written with a specific tayū in mind. In Chikamatsu’s case this would have most often been Takemoto Gidayū. It was thus also Chikamatsu’s job to include the aforementioned fushizuke that guide the tayū in his reading. The musical aspect of jōruri being every bit as important as the dramatic aspect, there are often lines, and even entire passages that are written to have a particular rhythm and cadence, and not necessarily to have any clear meaning. In fact, Chikamatsu, though sought after to do what he was good at, was not particularly famous in life. The texts were considered the least important element of a jōruri, after the tayū, the musicians, and the artistry of the puppets. Much of Chikamatsu’s success might not have been had were it not for Takemoto Gidayū. This is in contrast to Shakespeare, who was quite famous even in his own time.

The style of language is also different. While Chikamatsu’s narrative passages follow a seven-five, seven-five pattern of syllables, most of his dialogue is in prose, and
often resembles normal speech; unlike Shakespeare whose dialogue is usually somewhat unnatural. On the other hand, when Chikamatsu is trying to fill a particular syllabic meter, instead of using awkward language to make the meter work, he fills in extra syllables with meaningless particles that are intended to sound well when sung. These extra syllables, however, often make the text more difficult to read than otherwise awkward language, as it can be a challenge to separate meaningful particles from meaningless extra syllables. For example, the third act of Imamiya no Shinjū opens with a literary device called a kazoeuta, or “counting song.” Each stanza in the kazoeuta follows a 5-7-5-7-5 syllable pattern, and begins with a counting word such as hitotsu, “one,” followed in the next stanza by futatsu, “two.” The first word in the line following the counting word starts with the same sound as the counting word. The first two lines of the second stanza in this particular kazoeuta read, “futatsu to ya, fude mo arekashi.”

Futatsu and fude both start with “fu.” The “futatsu” doesn’t mean anything in context—it is merely there for the sake of sounding nice. Also, note the “to ya” after the “futatsu.” They are a virtually meaningless combination of particles meant simply to highlight the “futatsu,” to fill in the five-syllable line, and to sound a certain way. As one might imagine, passages like this are a pain for translators to include in any sensible way in English, while capturing the same nuances.

Finally, there is a great difference in the morality of the dramas of Chikamatsu and Shakespeare. “Considerations of honor may override all other sentiments; when one husband decides to kill his wife as a punishment for adultery he is encouraged by her father and brother. We may even be expected to sympathize with a man who deserts his loving wife and children to commit suicide with a prostitute.”\textsuperscript{14} This is a major cultural

\textsuperscript{14} Keene, \textit{Major Plays}: 2.
difference which, as Japan becomes more westernized, even estranges Chikamatsu’s Edo period morality from many modern Japanese readers. Moreover, while modern Japanese readers will at least be familiar with historical context for the behavior of Chikamatsu’s protagonists, it is difficult for Western readers to understand why they should be sympathetic. That is, modern Japanese readers are more likely to get Shakespeare than Western readers are to get Chikamatsu. While the motives of the characters in *Hamlet* still seem relevant today, it is difficult to be sympathetic towards the scheming, abusive Jihei in *Shinjū Ten no Amijima*.

It is clear that comparing Chikamatsu to Shakespeare is grossly misleading on many fronts. Nevertheless, Chikamatsu is the premier playwright of the Edo period, and is thus of great cultural significance. There is no reason that Chikamatsu’s entire body of work should not be translated into English—the fact that it hasn’t is simply a matter of practicality. First, it is easy to excuse the fact that none of Chikamatsu’s *kabuki* plays have been translated. While many of Chikamatsu’s *jōruri* have been adapted for *kabuki*, he was not particularly known for his *kabuki* plays. For that matter, there are not even complete texts surviving for most of his known *kabuki* plays, only summaries. Perhaps his most famous *kabuki*, *Keisei Hotoke no Hara*, should be translated; but as there are a number of more famous *kabuki* plays available for translation, it is no surprise that Chikamatsu’s have not been given priority.

As for Chikamatsu’s *jōruri* plays, there is of course the great number of them to consider. Serious study in the West of Japanese literature, especially Edo-period literature, is still relatively new. While Shakespeare had been popular among Japanese scholars since the nineteenth century, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that
serious scholarship on Chikamatsu started coming out of the West. By the time Tsubouchi Shōyō completed his translations of Shakespeare’s thirty-seven plays, Japanese scholars had been studying Shakespeare seriously for nearly a hundred years. In contrast, it has been only fifty years since Keene’s translation of *Kokusen’ya Kassen* came out, and there are nearly a hundred Chikamatsu *jōruri* to translate. Given the ten years between *Kokusen’ya Kassen* and *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, one might make a rough estimate that it would take ten Donald Keenes ten years to translate the entire body of Chikamatsu’s work, and that sort of man power simply does not exist. While there are growing numbers of people who would be capable of translating Chikamatsu, there are also many poems, *monogatari*, and works of modern literature to be translated.

The sheer difficulty of translating Chikamatsu may also drive away would-be translators. For example there are the nonsensical filler words and awkward to translate poetic language as mentioned above. Early on in his efforts, Keene dismissed the many “puns, allusions, [and] repetitions” as “incommunicable stylistic fripperies.” However, Donald Shively called Keene on his arrogance, criticizing that “it seems unnecessarily condescending to dismiss as ‘stylistic fripperies’ devices which, in the Japanese literary tradition, are among the most important ingredients of style.” Keene seemed to agree with this criticism, as his later efforts attempted, usually extraordinarily successfully, to bring the fully flavor of the original texts into English. This is no small feat, as the author has experienced with his own efforts in translating Chikamatsu.

Undoubtedly the most difficult passages in any Chikamatsu *jōruri* are the final acts, called *michiyuki*, which usually involve two lovers running off to commit suicide.

---

While the *michiyuki* is the most famous part of many *jōruri*, often performed by themselves, one wonders how well even Chikamatsu’s contemporaries followed them. The language more closely resembles an illogical stream of thought than a coherent narrative, though at the same time they do have a narrative nature as well. For example, in *Imamiya no Shinjū*, the two lovers run from Honmachi, a street in Osaka, to Ebisu Shrine, their ultimate destination. This is narrated by reading each street that they pass between Honmachi and Ebisu, and a word play is made on each of the street names. This kind of word play is called a *kakekotoba*, or pivot word, where part of one word is used twice as the beginning of another word. Sometimes several of these word plays are compounded, giving some words complex triple meanings. There are also series *engo*, or “related words,” whose relation is not necessarily relevant to the narrative, or even readily apparent. These are often difficult to describe, and come in many forms. In *Imamiya no Shinjū* there is a passage in which the scenery around Ebisu Shrine is described using terms related to the clothes worn by the female lead. For example, the dark blue color of her *kimono* is simultaneously used to refer to the color of the water in the nearby river.

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that many of Chikamatsu’s plays lack any deep scholarship even in Japanese. The most popular ones have been well-researched, but in order to translate an even slightly more obscure play, translators are left with the task of discovering most of the word plays and researching the allusions themselves. Anybody translating Chikamatsu will quickly encounter frustration with the differing needs and attitudes of Western scholars as compared to Japanese scholars. Donald Keene complained that “I not only wanted to know what a decorative phrase
meant by itself but also what its relevance was in context, a question which seems seldom to have troubled Japanese commentators. Or, sometimes I merely wanted to know who says what, a question not without interest in Western dramaturgy, though apparently only of casual interest to the student of jōruri.\textsuperscript{17} Though the problem of who is saying what can usually be solved by gathering the context of the dialogue and the speech patterns of the characters, some of the other problems, such as deciding upon the contextual relevance of some decorative phrase, cannot be solved through any more than creativity and guesswork.

Finally, while Chikamatsu’s best known works are his sewamono, most of his canon consists of the historically (pre-Edo) situated jidaimono. These are perhaps the most difficult to translate, as they assume a full, working knowledge of Japanese history. Some of these jidaimono refer to famous accounts for which there are a great deal of existing reference material. However, most jidaimono are dense works even for expert translators, and as suggested before there just simply isn’t the manpower to bring many of them into English. While Chikamatsu’s significance has not been overstated, not all of his works are necessarily of great interest, considering that many of them have not even interested Japanese scholars. Many of them are also rather repetitive. Though there are numerous Chikamatsu plays that probably should still be translated, but there is not necessarily a need to translate all of them.

References


