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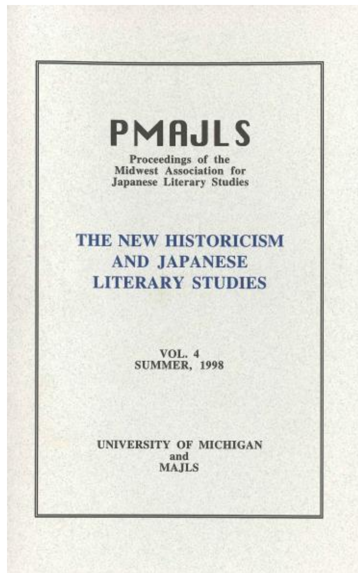

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Cultural Ambivalence and Sexuality in Tsubouchi Shōyō's *Tōsei shosei katagi*

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Although Tsubouchi Shōyō is one of the most famous figures to emerge from the early-Meiji literary reform movement, the general consensus regarding his contribution is at best ambivalent. Traditionally he has been praised for his insights as a literary critic, but derided for his incompetence as an author. This judgment is based on the mixed response to Shōyō's two major compositions, both written and released for publication at roughly the same time during late 1885 and early 1886. *Shōsetsu shinzui* (Essence of the Novel) is a literary treatise that promotes the novel as a viable literary art form. *Tōsei shosei katagi* (The Characters of Modern Students) was conceived as the literary text that embodies the principles espoused in *Shōsetsu shinzui*.

Ironically, the ultimate decline of Shōyō's reputation can be seen as a direct consequence of the enthusiasm with which his ideas were initially received. In particular, the first half of *Shōsetsu shinzui* effectively tapped into the mixed mood of anxiety and optimism that pervaded the Japanese intellectual community during the first years of Meiji. At the core of this mood was the notion that the operations of culture are subject to the same evolutionary imperatives that affect the development of biological species. The anxiety that Japanese intellectuals felt can be located in the perception that Japanese culture was less "evolved" than the cultures of Western Europe and the United States. The concurrent sense of optimism derived from the belief that the principles of evolution were universal, and that given time

and effort Japanese civilization would achieve parity with, and perhaps even supersede, the civilizations of the West.

Shōyō's discussion of the novel relies heavily on this Darwinian framework. In fact, his entire argument is predicated on the assumption that art evolves over time. In the past, Shōyō claims, art was simple. As a civilization advances, however, modes of artistic expression become increasingly sophisticated. At the pinnacle of Shōyō's evolutionary ladder is the novel. This positioning allowed Shōyō to promote the novel as the art form most suited to represent the conditions of modern, "advanced" humanity. As Shōyō puts it: "The evolutionary development of man naturally led to the appearance of the novel and its rapid rise to prominence" (p. 67).[1]

By incorporating the notion of evolution into his promotion of the novel, Shōyō effectively played upon the prevailing zeitgeist of the 1880s. Essentially, he took a concept in common currency and applied it specifically to a discussion of Japanese literary reform. The successful execution of this rhetorical move allowed Shōyō to establish himself as one of the leading figures in the nascent literary reform movement and to insure the advancement of his own intellectual agenda for the development of Japanese literature. Yet when Shōyō tried his own hand at the composition of prose fiction, it did not live up to expectations. From its first appearance, *Tōsei shosei katagi* has been criticized as a work that is not "progressive" enough. The tone of these attacks was established by Takada Sanae's influential review of the work. Takada observed that Shōyō's effort was respectable, when one considered that it was written by a member of a "second-tier" civilization, but that it still did not measure up to the works being

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[1] References to *Shōsetsu shinzui* will be given parenthetically in the text. Passages are cited from Tsubouchi Shōyō, *Shōsetsu shinzui*, *Nihon kindai bungaku taikei*, Vol. 3 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1974).

produced by authors from "first-tier" civilizations in the West.[2] In short, Takada admonished Shōyō for not reproducing a Western novel. From his perspective, any deviation from this normative standard constituted a sign of cultural atavism.

What I want to do for the remainder of this paper is reconsider the implications of *Tōsei shosei katagi*'s supposed "failure." Rather than heap more criticism on the text for not measuring up to some arbitrary standard of "progress" or try to recuperate the text by demonstrating how it actually is more "progressive" than other critics have recognized, I want to present *Tōsei shosei katagi* as a highly ambivalent commentary on the value of evolution as an epistemological device. That is to say, I will consider ways in which the text simultaneously affirms and disavows cultural applications of Darwinism.

Specifically, I will demonstrate how this ambivalence toward evolution is made manifest in the text's discussion of love and sexuality. I focus on these particular issues for two reasons. The first reason is that love and sexuality are key elements in Shōyō's theoretical discussion of literary evolution. Mirroring the wider tendency of late-nineteenth-century cultural critiques to use courtship customs, marriage customs and sexual practices as gauges to determine the level of a non-Western society's evolutionary development, Shōyō proposes that the manner in which a text represents love and sex is indicative of its artistic merit. Texts that focus excessively on graphic representations of sexual activity are less "evolved" pieces of art than those that devote themselves to the emotional aspect of romance. Second, love and desire are central to the plot of *Tōsei shosei katagi*. As numerous critics have pointed out, the narrative is divided into

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[2] Takada Sanae, "*Tōsei shosei katagi* no hihyō," *Kindai bungaku hyōron taikei*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1971), 334.

two basic parts: a *ninjō mono* (romantic tale) component and a *katagi mono* (character study) component. The *ninjō mono* constitutes sections of the narrative that relate directly to the romantic entanglements of Komachida Sanji, a diligent young student, and Tanoji, a beautiful geisha. It recounts the social pressures that conspire to keep the couple apart. Interwoven into their story are the *katagi mono* elements of the narrative, which consist of character sketches of Komachida's classmates. Obviously, the issues of love and sexuality permeate the romantic *ninjō mono* on almost every level. Perhaps less expected, however, is the fact that the *katagi mono*, too, revolves around these issues, for each character sketch focuses almost exclusively on its subject's approach toward romance.

Tōsei shosei katagi's preoccupation with the issues of love and sexuality; or more specifically, its determination to provide readers with an exhaustive commentary on the way that different personality types approach love and sexuality takes on added significance when read in the context of Shōyō's introduction to the text. There Shōyō advises his reading audience: "It is my hope that after observing the practices of student society....you, my readers, will have acquired the wisdom necessary to cast off depravity and embrace virtue" (p. 222).[3] The term Shōyō uses for "depravity" is *iyashiki* or *rōretsu*; the term for "virtue," *tōtoki* or *kōshō*. These are the same terms that in *Shōsetsu shinzui* Shōyō used to signify the categories of "the evolved" and "the unevolved." Indeed, these idioms were central to much of the *bunmei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment) propaganda that was being disseminated throughout Japan during the first years of Meiji. By deliberately establishing this context, the introduction

[3] References to *Tōsei shosei katagi* will be given parenthetically in the text. Passages are cited from Tsubouchi Shōyō, *Tōsei shosei katagi*, *Nihon kindai bungaku taikei*, Vol. 3 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1974).

suggests that the text should be read as a primer on the differences between "evolved" and "unevolved" behavior. Or more specifically, given the narrative's singular focus on the romantic and sexual exploits of its characters, the introduction implies that *Tōsei shosei katagi* is an extended rumination on the distinction between "evolved" and "unevolved" approaches to love and sexuality.

The highest expression of love and sexuality in *Tōsei shosei katagi*'s hierarchy is epitomized by the romance between Komachida and Tanoji. The narrative signals the pre-eminence of this bond in a number of different ways. For example, the story of Komachida and Tanoji is consistently narrated in an elevated literary language distinct in form from the language used in other sections of the text. In an aside to his reading audience, the narrator explains that this rhetorical move is necessary since colloquial language could never do justice to the nature of Komachida and Tanoji's attachment. Also noteworthy is the fact that their affair is favorably compared to the romance depicted in Edward Bulwar-Lytton's novel, *Rienzi* (1840). This comparison is significant because elsewhere in the narrative, Shōyō makes a point of informing his readers that the love affair in *Rienzi* exemplifies the highest form of love, or what he refers to as "kami no koi" (p. 358). The defining characteristic of "kami no koi," and what differentiates it from the less evolved categories of "chū no koi" (middle-level love) and "shimo no koi" (low-level love), is its non-utilitarian nature. Shōyō asserts that in its purest distillation love exists in a realm unaffected by material considerations. It should be noted that this interpretation of "pure love" closely parallels Shōyō's definition of pure art. In *Shōsetsuu shinzui* he asserts that art at its most evolved transcends the need for utilitarian benefits. In the context of this rhetoric, the fact that Komachida's worldly prospects can only

suffer if he becomes romantically involved with a geisha like Tanoji is precisely of what makes his sentiments so admirable. This kind of love, the narrative suggests, flies in the face of conventional self-interest. Through all of these different strategies, then, the narrative of *Tōsei shosei katagi* privileges the bond between Komachida and Tanoji above all other expressions of love and desire presented in the text.

Despite this overall tendency to affirm Komachida and Tanoji's relationship, there is also an element of ambivalence in the representation of their bond. The clearest articulation of this comes from a character named Moriyama Tomoyoshi, a classmate of Komachida's and, as his given name "tomoyoshi" signifies, a good and caring friend. Motivated by sincere concern for his classmate's well-being, Moriyama encourages Komachida to end his association with Tanoji. Blending together elements from the Meiji ideology of *risshin shusse* (personal advancement) and traditional rhetoric associated with the Neo-Confucianism, Moriyama reminds Komachida that he owes it to his nation, his family and most of all himself to avoid any obstacle that might prevent him from advancing in the world. In other words, Moriyama makes a convincing case against the non-utilitarian ethos of "kami no koi." The persuasive power of this argument is evidenced by Komachida's change of heart; he eventually forswears any affection for Tanoji and declares to the world that his chief aspiration in life is "to be something" (p. 342). It should be pointed out that the narrative never censures Komachida for his rejection of the "kami no koi" ideal. To the contrary, his actions are presented as a believable, even honorable, decision for a young man in his position. Indeed, the narrative itself is ambivalent enough about the possibility of a union between Komachida and Tanoji that it concludes without offering any concrete resolution to their story. The narrative closes with the

following enigmatic comment: "At this point it is still uncertain whom Tanoji will marry" (p. 431).

A hint of ambivalence can also be detected in the representation of another character's romantic aspirations. A native of Kyūshū, Kiriyama Benroku is a country bumpkin who manages to reveal his provincialism at every turn. He is violent and uncouth, prone to fist fights and completely unschooled in the finer points of Meiji "civilization." But the characteristic that really distinguishes Kiriyama from his classmates is his sexual preference for young men. In fact, he is the only character in the text who strays from the orthodoxy of male-female love. And significantly he is also the only character whose sexual and romantic practices are labeled with the such pejorative terms as *rōshu* (barbaric custom) and *waisetsu* (perversion). If Komachida's sentiments for Tanoji represent the highest form of love, then Kiriyama's frustrated desire for his younger classmates occupies the opposite end of the spectrum. So low is his status in the hierarchy of *Tōsei shosei katagi* that he is even held in contempt by Tsugihara Seizō, an exemplar of "shimo no koi" who shamelessly frequents brothels in pursuit of sexual gratification. Kiriyama's position in the text as the embodiment of humanity at its most "unevolved" is further highlighted by his complete disregard for personal hygiene and his array of congenital disabilities, including poor eye-sight, premature hair loss and a skin condition.

Ironically, though, it is this unmistakable throwback who serves as the mouthpiece for the only explicit reference to Darwinism in *Tōsei shosei katagi*. Kiriyama resorts to Darwin as part of his elaborate defense of male-male sexuality. According to Kiriyama, the operations of society are subject to the simple rule of "might is right" (p. 309). He declares: "It's just as Darwin said, the strong prevail, while the weak come to nothing" (p.

309). Kiriyama then turns to the traditional doctrine of samurai asceticism to propose that a man's best hope for maintaining his masculine vigor is to associate exclusively with other males, even if it necessitates engaging in sexual relationships with them. The supreme irony of this line of reasoning is that it effectively incorporates the principles of Darwinism into the defense of a sexual practice that was regularly treated as symptom of a biological atavism.

Elsewhere Kiriyama is even more direct in his challenge to the tendency to classify sexual and romantic proclivities under the twin rubrics of "the evolved" and "the unevolved." Kiriyama makes this point as he defends his outlook to another classmate. To his interlocutor's observation, "But isn't [male-male love] unnatural," Kiriyama replies, "Don't be a fool! If it occurs, it can't be unnatural" (p. 311). This resistance to his classmate's definition of "nature" has wide-reaching implications. The classmate's application of the term "unnatural" suggests a prescriptive view of nature that echoes the prejudices held by most late-nineteenth century scientists and physicians both in Japan and the West. As Ernest van den Haag explains:

> [Nineteenth-century intellectuals] believed in human "progress" which is to consist of an increasing domination of the moral (civilizing) over the savage biological instincts. [They] felt that nature itself pointed, if it did not push, toward such progress--its laws were tailored to that end, and were not to be violated. Thus, the natural purpose of intercourse was propagation of the species; all sexual activities which would not, at least ultimately, lead to this accomplishment via a properly monogamous family were *ipso facto* tainted by pathology. Ultimately this conception goes back to the Aristotelian notion of a teleological natural law with normative meaning, a notion transmitted to us through teaching of the churches and reflected clearly in the wording of

> American statutes prohibiting sexual acts described as "unnatural" or "against nature."[4]

"Nature" is thus conflated with "evolutionary progress," and as a consequence anything that deviates from a limited notion of "progress" can be characterized as "unnatural." Given his lowly status in the rhetoric of evolution, it behooves Kiriyama to promote an alternative world-view, one that is not contingent on evolutionary principles. In this manner, he not only asserts the validity of his own existence, but also raises doubts about using "progress" as the standard against which to measure all human behavior.

Here, I want to emphasize that I am not offering *Tōsei shosei katagi* as a covertly gay-affirmative text. It would be difficult to deny the narrative's general tendency to hierarchize different approaches toward love and sexuality, judging some to be more "evolved" than others. It would be equally difficult to support an argument that Kiriyama's preference for male-male love occupies any position other than the lowest rung of this hierarchy. But as I have demonstrated, there is also apparent in the text an element of anxiety about the implications of this investment in "progress" as an evaluative standard--especially when it is applied to the realm of love and desire. I am hardly alone in commenting on this ambivalent attitude. Indeed, it comes up in almost every discussion of Shōyō's text, starting with Takada Sanae's review of the story and persisting all the way to Marleigh Grayer-Ryan's reconsideration of Shōyō in the early 1970s. The only difference is that what I have referred to as anxiety about evolution is usually coded as evidence of Shōyō's inability to overcome his reliance on the tropes of Edo literature. My discomfort with this canonical interpretation of *Tōsei shosei katagi* is not motivated by a sense

[4] Ernest van den Haag, "Introduction," *Psycopathia Sexualis* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 15-16.

that it fails to do justice to the talents of Tsubouchi Shōyō--although in all honesty I find his text to be both intellectually and aesthetically satisfying. Rather, I feel that this approach co-opts elements of the text that react against the ideology of evolution and uses them to reify a system in which an arbitrary notions of "progress" becomes the ultimate standard for evaluating the operations of culture.

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