Double Suicide at Rosmersholm

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[This paper was presented at the International Ibsen Conference in New York in June, 2003. At the presentation of the paper some video clips of a Buranku performance of *Double Suicide at Sonezaki* and my production of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* were shown to illustrate my arguments.
The lines of *Rosmersholm* are quoted from Rolf Fjelde (trans.), *Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays,* New York: New American Library, 1965.]

In May 1703, a traditional puppet play entitled *Double Suicide at Sonezaki* by Chikamatsu Monzaemon was first performed at the Takemoto Theatre in Osaka, the second largest town in Japan. Chikamatsu, sometimes called the Japanese Shakespeare, is one of the greatest playwrights in the history of Japanese theatre. 183 years later, in December 1886, a modern play entitled *Rosmersholm* by Henrik Ibsen, the most provocative playwright in Europe at the time, was published in Copenhagen. Next year it was put on stage all over Europe, starting in Bergen in January. Still 116 years later, in October 2002, a play entitled *The White Horse in Rosmersholm,* a Japanese version of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm,* was performed at one of the modern theatres in Tokyo. This version was written and directed by me (Mitsuya Mori) .

Chikamatsu's play, *Double Suicides at Sonezaki,* was a haste dramatization of an actual event, which had occurred a month earlier. It was the double suicide of a young merchant apprentice and his lover, a lower class courtesan in Sonezaki Quarters, whose dead bodies were found in the nearby Sonezaki Wood. So, the performance was a kind of living newspaper for the audience. It was an immediate box office hit and saved the almost bankrupt Takemoto Theatre. Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* ends with the double suicide which is rarely seen in the history of European drama. The play was so enigmatic for the late 19th century audience that even Ibsen's rising reputation did not prevent the play from severe criticisms, or open abuses as on the occasion of the production in London.

It goes without saying that Chikamatsu's and Ibsen's plays have nothing to do with each other. It is totally unthinkable that Ibsen ever heard of the name of Chikamatsu; perhaps Ibsen never had any interest in Japanese theatre. I think, however, that my production of *The White Horse at Rosmersholm* revealed some aspects which would link Chikamatsu and Ibsen, dramatically and theatrically. To be sure, it was not by any means a so-called intercultural performance, such as Ninagawa's or Suzuki's "Shakespeare in Kabuki". Therefore, the present paper is no comparative study of Chikamatsu and Ibsen. What I would like to present now is, rather, my analysis of *Rosmersholm* from the perspective of Chikamatsu's play, particularly focusing on the double suicide in both plays.

But some of you may not be familiar with Chikamatsu's play, so I shall give a short summary of the play's plot before starting my argument.

Tokubei, a merchant apprentice, is deeply in love with Ohatsu, a young courtesan in Sonezaki Quarters. She is also deeply in love with him. Because of this love Tokubei turns down his master's offer of marriage with his nice, and his furious master expels him from Osaka. Then, Tokubei is accused in public by his friend, Kuheiji, who owes money to Tokubei, of forging his IOU. This is a public shame, a great disgrace, for the young merchant. Hearing this story, Ohatsu urges Tokubei to wipe away his dishonor by committing suicide with her. She will have no joy in life without him anyway. They run away together from the tea house in the midnight, trying not to be seen by anyone, for a courtesan is strictly forbidden to leave out of the pleasure quarter. The last act shows ***michiyuki,*** a journey to the Wood, accompanied with a heartbreaking singing of the narrator. Ohatsu and Tokubei come to the wood and commit double suicide; first Tokubei stabs Ohatsu to death with a short sword, and immediately after, he cuts his own throat.

The biggest problem for interpreting Ibsen's ***Rosmersholm*** is, without doubt, the double suicide of Rosmer and Rebekka at the end of the play. As is well known, criticisms of the play have been almost evenly divided into positive and negative views concerning the final decision of Rosmer and Rebekka. Although I stand on the positive side, I acknowledge that both views could be equally justified, according to the critic's world view to see the whole action of the play. I suspect, however, that the difficulty of interpreting the double suicide in ***Rosmersholm*** might be based, partly at least, perhaps even unconsciously, upon the traditional view of Christianity that suicide is sinful against God. Although this tradition only started with Saint Augustine in the 4th century, and some thinkers, such as Erasmus and Thomas More in the Renaissance Ages and Rousseau, Hume, and Hegel in the modern times, defended suicidal deeds, many Western countries regarded suicide, and even suicide attempt, as a legal crime, and punished it accordingly. It continued well into the 20th century in some countries.

But in Japan, under the influence of Buddhism, suicide has not been regarded negatively. On the contrary, suicide has often been considered to be an honorable deed as an apology for one's misdeed or wrong behavior. You may be immediately reminded of some Japanese samurai film which shows a samurai cutting the abdomen with a short sword, so-called "harakiri", though we prefer to call it "seppuku". In the pre-modern times, some Buddhist priests even recommended people to commit suicide as a means of producing religious ecstasy.

However, double suicide of lovers was another matter. It is scarcely found in documents or literary works before the second half of the 17th century. You can imagine that under the feudal system it was considered to be unti-social because it suggested a kind of freedom of love. But Chikamatsu's *Double Suicide at Sonezaki* in 1703 ignited a boom of love suicide plays, which idealized the tragic fate of the star-crossed lovers. Young people were inspired by them so much as to follow the examples of the stage in actual lives. The government had to ban the performances of double suicide plays altogether in 1723.

Shinju, the Japanese word for ' double suicide ', literally means "inside the mind". It was originally used as an expression, *shinju-date,* setting *shinju,* which means to prove a faithful love between a courtesan and her customer. The way to prove is, for example, to send a special letter of a vow or a few hairs, to make a tattoo on the arm, or even to cut off a little finger. This custom became so fashionable that special boxes for keeping those items were on sale! So, those means of proof inevitably came to be undervalued. Consequently, suicide was regarded to be the last and only trustworthy way to prove one's true love. Of course, unhappy lovers believe that they will be united in the heaven, the belief which was endorsed, ironically, by the feudal teaching in the pre-modern Edo era that the link between a husband and wife should continue into the next world, while that between parents and children would last only in this world.

Shinju is defined as a double suicide of a man and woman, who have mutually consented to simultaneously die. Therefore, the case of Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play is no *shinju* in the true sense of the word. Shinju is in a way a strongly willed and carefully planned co-rebellion of a man and woman against the social or personal oppression. Being forced to be commercial objects for the pleasure of customers every night, the girls in the pleasure house were strictly controlled for their behaviors, never allowed to go out of the quarters without permission. Death of a girl would be a huge loss for the owner, and so, double suicide of a courtesan and her customer should be prevented by all means. No wonder that the government banned the double suicide plays, which would implicitly suggest a means to have freedom of love in the feudal society.

In *Double Suicide at Sonezaki,* the first half of the play is intended to show why and how Ohatsu and Tokubei come to decide to commit double suicide. The second is merely intended to show how they escape undetected from the pleasure quarters in the midnight and make a brief journey to the nearby Sonezaki Wood. They utter only few lines in these scenes, almost silent during their journey. But, why do they have to escape to the Wood to die together? Since they kill themselves with a short sword, they could do that in any place. The reason is obvious; they wish to die in a wood, which is considered to be a sacred place of a god's living. But, as you see in Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* for example, it may be a universal way of thinking to take a wood or forest as another world different from the world of everyday life. Characters must make a journey to that different world in order to understand a true love. For that matter, it need not necessarily be a forest or wood, but must be a different land, as in the cases of other Shakespearean comedies, such as *The Merchant of Venice* or *The Twelfth Night.*

However, Chikamatsu's play holds one distinct feature for the journey to death. The third and last act starts with the narrator's beautiful chanting, and Ohatsu and Tokubei appear onto the stage. They come across a bridge over a river between this side of the land and that side of the Wood; it is the Bridge of Umeda. The lines go in Donald Keene's translation as follow:

> TOKUBEI: Let's think the Bridge of Umeda,
> The bridge the magpies built and make a vow
> That we will always be Wife and Husband Stars.
> NARRATOR: "With all my heart," she says and clings to him:
> So many are the tears that fall between the two,
> The waters of the river must have risen.
> (*Anthology of Japanese Literature,* New York: Grove Press, 1955, p.405.)

In order to go from this world to that world beyond, one must cross a bridge. In almost all of Chikamatsu's double suicide plays, a bridge is set in the last scene of committing double suicide, and the lovers must walk over it to reach the dying place, the world beyond.

In ***Rosmersholm*** the footbridge *(kloppen)* over the millrace *(møllefossen)* is just outside Rosmer's house. It can be seen from the window, and is mentioned three times in the play. At the very beginning of the play, Rebekka and Madam Helseth are watching through the window that Rosmer comes close to the bridge. Madam Helseth says, "Will he dare go over the footbridge?" Rebekka replies after a short pause, "No, he's turning back. Taking the upper path again today." Thus, the play begins with a riddle for the audience. The enigma is reinforced by the white horse, which both Rebekka and Madam Helseth mentions soon after. The riddle is seemingly solved for the audience in the course of the first and second act; Rosmer's late wife, Beate, jumped into the millrace from the footbridge a year before. But why, in fact, does this event prevent Rosmer from crossing the bridge? Usually Rosmer's hesitation is explained in a psycho-analytical way. But, looked at from the perspective of Chikamatsu's double suicide play, the footbridge in ***Rosmersholm*** also could be seen as a link between this world of the living and that world of the dead.

At the end of the third act, when Rosmer is shocked by Rebekka's confession and goes out of the house with Kroll, Rebekka watches outside, again, through a window. She says to herself, "Again, not by the bridge—but around, by the high path. Never across the mill-race. Never." Rosmer is now together with Kroll, who did not mind at all walking over the bridge at the beginning of the play, though Beate was his own sister. Do Rosmer and Kroll together go round the millrace, or take their ways separately? This question probably would not occur to the general audience. Only the fact that Rosmer all the time does not dare to cross the bridge is emphasized here. But at the very end of the play, Madam Helseth looks out through a window once again, and finds both Rebekka and Rosmer standing on the bridge, embracing each other. "My Lord, it's them, both, on the bridge! God have mercy on the sinful creatures! Embracing each other like that!" They jump into the millrace over the bridge, and went to the world beyond.

Waters separate the two world, the world of the living and the world of the dead, in many mythological or folkloric stories. In Greek mythology a dead person makes a trip over the river Akeron, and in Buddhism the river called ***Sanzu.*** Waters hold purifying power actually and symbolically. This is, I suppose, a universal truth. Thus, Hamlet changes between the fourth and fifth acts, by going out on a sea trip to England. His purified character is clearly shown in the grave-yard scene in the last act. It has a special significance, therefore, that Rebekka came to Rosmersholm on a sea trip. (Of course, it is the only way to travel in Norway!) It was a trip from Finmark, the land of paganism, if not the land of the dead. In Japanese folklore a stranger from another land appears across a bridge over the river. In the traditional Noh drama, the main character is often a ghost of a dead person, who comes onto the main stage through the long extended side-stage, called ***hashi-gakari,*** meaning bridge-way. He or she literally comes over the bridge from the world beyond, behind the curtain, to this world, on the stage. In Kabuki theatre, the extended side-stage is called ***hana-michi,*** flower-way, which runs through the auditorium. Nonetheless, it functions as a linkage between this world and that world, sometimes between the world of the audience and that of the actors on the stage. The name, flower-way, however, emphasizes gaiety and beauty of the world of the living.

The world beyond is hidden and unknown, and so strange to people in this world. In folklore‘ a beggar ’coming from another land is often a wandering god. He or she is a person for detestation and respect at the same time. Purity and pollution stand as one and same thing. This is perhaps the reason why a river runs between. Waters hold power to purify pollution. They animate and destroy our world. In an actual town, a river is running through the center, and the area of one side of the river is often for higher class people than the area of the other. In a Japanese town in old days, people on one side were often discriminated against. Discrimination derived from their professions, which were indispensable in the society but detested by people. It was sometimes confused with racial discrimination. But discrimination is in fact based on the feeling of awe.

Rebekka is also under such discrimination. I must say in haste, I am afraid I, as an outsider, have no true understanding of such an issue in Norway. But I suppose that the indication of Rebekka's having come from Finmark is a clear implication of her particular situation. She is a kind of person to be detested and admired at the same time.

At the end of the play, Rebekka decides to commit suicide. She goes out of the house for the first time in the play. We do not see the journey to death, ***michiyuki.*** But the dying spot is just outside the house, and the action is described by Madam Helseth. She sees Rosmer and Rebekka embracing each other on the bridge, and then, screams, "Oh! Falling—both of them! Into the water. Help! Help!" This is an act of purification. Rebekka is aware of her pollution, but death holds a purifying power

Admittedly, ***Rosmersholm*** is a modern play, and should not be seen merely from the viewpoint of mythology or folklore. The play is full of political and moral issues reflecting the contemporary Norwegian society in the 1880s. As you know, this was a decade for the beginning of truly modern literature in Norway, which was a conflict between old and new literary generations. The situation was the same to some extent at the turn of the 17th century in Japan. A feeling of freedom was brought up under the prevailing economic power of the newly formed class of the self-standing merchants. This was the period of unusually rich productions of literary works. Basho innovated the form of haiku, transforming the conventional poetry. Saikaku wrote a surprisingly modern type of novels, based on the merchant life. So did Chikamatsu plays for both kabuki and puppet theatre. But it was indeed the power of money that was controlling people. Tokubei is disgraced because of the IOU, and Ohatsu is secluded in the pleasure quarters because of the money she owes to the master of the house. Their double suicide is an only means to free themselves from the binding chain of money.

In the social context, Rosmer's not daring to go over the bridge implies his lack of courage or inability to go from one world to the other, from the political conservatism to progressivism. Rebekka urges him to make a move in the first half of the play. But she comes to realize in the second half that the bridge is in fact over the deep abyss between the spiritual and the physical worlds. The two worlds also could be called mind and body, purity and pollution, morality and immorality, and, to be summed up, the male and the female worlds. Rosmer belongs to the one world and Rebekka to the other. Rebekka came to Romser over the sea, but he does not dare to come across the bridge to her. "You never set foot on the bridge, that I know." "You've noticed that?" "Yes. I knew, then, that my love was hopeless." They are referring an actual bridge outside, but in the dialogue itself, the "bridge" holds a clearly symbolic meaning, a bridge over the abyss between a man and a woman.

This division or separation is spatially reflected on the stage. Rosmer's house is set on the stage, spatially, that is, theatrically, opposed to the outside world on the back stage. The male world outside is merely watched by female characters through a window. The inside of the house is also divided into the up- and the downstairs; Rosmer belongs to the upstairs and Rebekka to the downstairs. And in the second act, the stage is, again, divided into the study and the bedroom; Rosmer belongs to the study and Rebekka to the bedroom. It is Rebekka, not Rosmer, who goes up and down and from one room to the other before the audience. Rebekka can cross the division; Rosmer does not. It is true that Ibsen always meticulously plans the dramatic space in his realistic play. The set is often divided into two parts, each of which symbolizes its own territory, as in the case of *The Wild Duck* or *Hedda Gabler.* But it is only in *Rosmersholm* that we see such a clear dramatic and theatrical structural pattern of the set. It combines the actual or social meaning and the folkloric or symbolic meaning.

It is a salient feature of Chikamatsu's double suicide play that the heroine is a stronger character than the hero. The girl takes the initiative for the idea of committing suicide, urging her male partner to go along with it. In the climactic scene of ***Double Suicide at Sonezaki,*** Ohatsu hides Tokubei under the elevated floor of the tea house, while serving the customer, Kuheiji, Tokubei's rival. She says that Tokubei must have determined to kill himself to wipe away his disgrace. In so saying, she demands that Tokubei consent, extending her bare foot to him below. Tokubei implies his determination to die by grasping her foot and imitating an act of cutting his throat with it as if it were a knife. This act is in a way very erotic.

It seems to me to be no coincidence that Rebekka is a stronger character than Rosmer. The female sensitivity may be more in accord with nature and so with the world beyond than the male sensitivity. Rebekka impressively talks about the midnight sun or the roaring sea waves in the winter. Rosmer never laughs nor cries. They seem to be so completely different characters. This is perhaps a reason, if not *the* reason, why we cannot easily accept their final act of double suicide as a perfect unity.

But the difference of Rosmer and Rebekka reminds me of the two types of culture, a guilt culture and a shame culture, which Ruth Benedict clarifies in her book on Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). She defines two cultures as follows:

> A society that inculcates absolute standards of morality and relies on men's developing a conscience is a guilt culture by definition(,.....). In a culture where shame is a major sanction, people are chagrined about acts which we expect people to feel guilty about(......). A man who has sinned can get relief by unburdening himself(......). Where shame is the major sanction, a man does not experience relief when he makes his fault public even to a confessor(......). Shame cultures therefore do not provide for

> confessions, even to the gods(......).
>
> True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism. A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasying to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not. (Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture,* Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1954 [1946], pp. 222-23.)

Benedict regards Japanese culture as a typical case of shame culture. There would be no doubt that both Ohatsu and Tokubei suffer from a feeling of shame rather than that of guilt. Depending on Benedict's definition, E.R.Dodds finds a shame culture in the ancient Greece in his book, *The Greek and the Irrational* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1951). A guilt culture, on the other hand, is found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rebekka comes from Finmark, the traditionally pagan land, and Rosmer is Christian by nature, even if he has abandoned his pastorship. Benedict's description of a shame culture would explain Rebekka's behaviors to a degree. This also would give an answer to the question of why Rebekka does not confess but hides her sexual relationship with Dr. West. Then, does the final double suicide of Rosmer and Rebekka symbolize the unity of a Christian and a non-Christian culture? Ibsen leaves it ambiguous whether or not Rosmer has decided to come back to the Christian church while being in town. But it is symbolic that Rosmer wishes to regain the innocence he has lost. Innocence is in Ibsen's original word *skyldfrihed,* literally meaning "being free from guilt." This word is foreign to Rebekka, a girl of a non-Christian culture. It shocks her and makes her feel ashamed of her past act.

The last scene of *Rosmersholm* is full of illogicalities, both internal and external. It seems as if both Rosmer's final and definite decision to die and Rebekka's final and definite acceptance of his decision were made almost with no self-reflection on either side. This is in sharp contrast to, for example, Dr. Wangel's and Elida's decisions at the end of *The Lady from the Sea.* It is true that Hedvig's or Hedda's decision to die may be made spontaneously, but it is because they experience externally new situations or occurrences. For Rosmer and Rebekka, the external situation is unchanged since the beginning of the last act. Rebekka was thinking of leaving Rosmersholm and Rosmer approved it. He might be thinking of killing himself, but it was nothing to do with what Rebekka would do. Nothing external occurs during the act, except for the second intrusion of Brendel.

In Chikamatsu's play, too, the double suicide of Ohatsu and Tokubei is surrounded by some illogicalities, again both internal and external. An unanswerable question is why Tokubei does not sue his friend, Kuheiji, for his ungrounded libel and denial of the IOU in order to recover his good reputation. (Today, it is customary to stage this play in an altered version in Kabuki, in which Kuheiji's lie is revealed but Tokubei and Ohatsu do not know this and commit double suicide.) But the biggest illogicality lies in the very act of double suicide itself. Because the lovers are not allowed to get married in this world, they die together in expectation of being united in Heaven. But we usually imagine that in Heaven we are only spiritual beings and that the physical union is out of question.

A mutual love is not objectively proved even by marriage. But a physical union, at least, give an evidence of sharing the same physical love. In fact, a proof has to be physical by definition. We can have no absolute proof on psychological matters. We are unable to have wholly reliable evidences about other people's feelings or thoughts. For that matter, we cannot be absolutely sure about even what we ourselves think or feel. Agnosticism goes to the extreme in case of love. You can never be certain of the love of the other. Once you fall in the net of doubt, you can never get rid of it. It is exactly in this net that Rosmer is trapped. This time it is Rebekka who brings up the idea of innocence, *skyldfrihed.* It binds her since she realized the true meaning of her relationship with Dr. West. Brendel suggests a self-sacrifice by imitating an act of cutting Rebekka's finger and ear, an obviously erotic action, similar to that of Tokubei's cutting his throat with Ohatsu's bare foot in *Double Suicide at Sonezaki.*

There can be, however, one possibility to regain innocence, in which one recovers faith in the other's love. That is death. Death is another extreme instance for agnosticism. No one knows what death is, nor what happens after death. As the most unknown of that world beyond, death is the greatest fear and literally the last thing we wish to experience. As the most unknown of this world, love is the greatest joy but in fact the last thing we believe. Death can be the strongest means to make your partner believe your love. This must be a sole reason for double suicide. It is not to prove love, but to have faith.

In *Double Suicide at Sonezaki,* Ohatsu and Tokubei decide to die together in the middle of the second act, and the rest of the play shows the process of their *michiyuki* to double suicide. In Rosmersholm, Rosmer and Rebekka keep asking each other until the last point of the play. The scene after Brendel in the last act shows the whole process of their coming to the answer,“ double suicide ”. This *is* their *michiyuki.*

REBECCA But tell me this first: is it you who go with me, or I who go with you?
ROSMER We'll never sift to the bottom of that.
REBECCA Still, I would like to know.
ROSMER. We follow each other, Rebecca. I, you—and you, me.
REBECCA. It seems that way.
ROSMER. For now we two are one.
REBECCA. Yes. Now we're one. Come! We'll go then—gladly.

The double suicide of Rosmer and Rebekka is neither victory nor defeat, neither idealization nor delusion of love. Critics who are skeptical of the conclusion of the play seem to me to be mistaken about the characteristic of the last dialogue of Rosmer and Rebekka. It is no easy journey to come to death. They are speaking slowly and searchingly. They are not saying that they are going to commit double suicide as the result of their having gotten to be one. They finally decide to die together, and so, they say they are one ***now.*** A man and a woman are one: this is a miracle. But they come onto the bridge, and jump into waters, which both separates and unites two entirely different worlds. Madam Helseth thinks that the dead wife has taken them. But the white horse is the emblem of death and life, embracing the two worlds. In my production, Rebekka puts the white shawl over Rosmer and herself, and they go.

Double suicide of Ohatsu and Tokubei was a social rebellion at the time. Whether or not double suicide of Rosmer and Rebekka holds any social significance will depend on how we look at our modern society.