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Representation of Male-Male Desire in Tachibana Sotoo's *Nanshoku Monogatari* (1952)

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Abstract Tachibana Sotoo (1894–1959), a novelist unknown outside Japan and not widely read in Japan either, was among the writers who depicted various forms of nonheteronormative sexuality in his work. Best known for his ghost stories later adapted into films by director Nakagawa Nobuo (1905-1989), Tachibana also published *Nanshoku Monogatari* (A Tale of Male Love) in 1952. This novel, largely inspired by the author's own experience, humorously recounts his crushes on his attractive classmates. The appreciation of teenage, androgynous beauty is central in this work where same-sex attraction is presented without moral judgment. The aim of this paper is to examine how Tachibana represents male-male desire in *Nanshoku Monogatari* and to investigate whether the novel challenged heteronormativity in post-war Japanese society. The novel will therefore also be analysed in relation to the homoerotic literature born in the Edo period (1603-1868) and later developed in pre-war modernist literature, in which romantic relationships between schoolboys were often depicted.

Keywords Tachibana Sotoo; *nanshoku*; *bishōnen'ai*; homosexuality; modernism.

1. Male-male eroticism and boy's love

The Japanese conception of male-male eroticism[1] from the early modern Edo period (1600-1867) onwards is the subject of a relatively large number of academic studies that have highlighted its historical evolution and its depiction in art and literature. Here, drawing mostly on the researches of Pflugfelder

[1] Eroticism is understood here in relation "to desire and the aesthetics of desire, a delayed or postponed promise of gratification, as opposed to the immediacy of sexualization" (Coates et al. 2019: 273). I chose not to use the term *homosexuality* and rather use *male-male eroticism* or *male-male desire*, because the idea of homosexuality can be misleading when applied in the context of Edo-period Japanese culture. Moreover, the Western concept of homosexuality, as will be discussed below, was introduced in late 19th century Japan and its translation into Japanese was neither unequivocal nor unproblematic. For the terminology used in early-modern and modern times to describe different expressions of male-male eroticism, see Pflugfelder' s thorough study (1999).

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(1999), McLelland (2000; 2015), Reichert (2006) and Angles (2011), I will briefly recall in which forms male-male eroticism manifested itself in early modern and modern Japan, in order to provide a socio-historical background to better understand Tachibana Sotoo's *Nanshoku Monogatari*.

Japanese art, poetry and literature of the Edo period often recounted and celebrated male-male eroticism between men in different contexts: Buddhist monasteries, samurai castles and the floating world (*ukiyo*) of *kabuki* theatres and brothels. Each of these worlds had its own terminology to define male-male relations and its own specific etiquette. In general, erotic interaction between two males was referred to as *nanshoku* (male-male eroticism/male eros) or *wakashudō* (The way of the youths).

Although the two terms were used almost interchangeably, the latter, often shortened to *shudō,* had a slightly different nuance. Since *wakashu* denoted an adolescent man, *wakashudō* was the way of loving youths, and referred to "age-graded eroticism between older men and younger boys" (Angles 2011: 7). The relationship was between an adult man (*nenja*) and a boy (*chigo* or *wakashu*) who had not yet undergone the ceremony marking coming of age.[2]

This is because the prevailing paradigm for male same-sex encounters in Tokugawa Japan followed "the principle of isomorphism between sexual relations and social relations. That is, behaviour in sexual relations mirrored the status and power differentials inherent in the greater society" (McLelland 2000: 19). In other words, there was an asymmetrical relationship in which the *nenja*'s offer of protection and care was reciprocated by the young man with obedience, respect and the granting of the privilege of the penetrative role in sexual intercourse.

In the highly homosocial context of the samurai class, the romantic relationship between two men was an accepted social practice with its own style and aesthetics. The beginning of the relationship was formally sanctioned by an exchange of written promises. The adult lover, who played the role of elder brother (*anibun*) took responsibility for supporting the boy financially, providing emotional support and contributing to his inner growth with examples of perfect samurai conduct. The boy assumed the role of the younger brother (*otōtobun*) within the couple and pledged to remain faithful to the elder brother, not to betray his love and to adopt his moral values. The way of the

[2] The celebration of an androgynous and ephebic youthful male beauty in Japanese culture probably dates back at least to the Heian (794-1185) period. It is only in the Edo period (1603-1868), however, that we see the development of a self-conscious literary tradition dedicated to exalting the allure of youthful male beauty.

youths was thus founded on principles of loyalty, obedience, respect and brotherhood that were the same as those underlying the ethics of *bushidō* (The way of warriors).

From the second half of the 17th century, with the blossoming of a vibrant urban culture that saw the rise of the *chōnin* class,[3] love between men, deprived of the romantic and edifying guise it had among the samurai, "became an economic transaction" (Maurizi 1997: 336): a brief mercenary encounter with male *kabuki* theatre actors or male prostitutes. The distinction between an actor and a professional or amateur prostitute was subtle, and the term generally used to refer to any male prostitute was *okama*, a compound word combining the honorific prefix *o* and the word 'ass' (*kama*).[4] A word still in use today with a rather loose meaning, as it can refer to a "cross-dressed and effeminate" man as well as a man "who displays any transgender attribute" (McLellan 2000: 7).

The wind of modernisation and 'civilisation' that swept Japan from the Meiji era (1868-1912) onwards did not spare the discourse on love, marriage, status of man and women and sexual conduct. The emulation of contemporary Western practices seemed indispensable for Japan to join the comity of so called 'civilized' nations. In the new 'enlightened' and 'civilized' Japan, male-female sexuality within the framework of state-sanctioned monogamous marriage gradually became the dominant paradigm. Ironically, in the mid-19th century, the love expressed by older men for young males was closer to the idea of spirituality and equality underlying Western notions of 'romantic love'. However, as husband-wife relationships came to be regarded as central to the new nation-building project of the Meiji state, male-male love was dismissed and considered the vestige of a feudal and uncivilised past (McLelland 2015:18).

In the late 19th century, the forms of male-male eroticism indicated by *nanshoku* and *shudō* were absorbed into the notion of 'same sex love', under the influence of the latest European studies on homosexuality. A term that during the 1910s and 1920s was more and more frequently translated into Japanese as *dōseai* (same sex love) and referred to both male-male and female-

[3] In the urban centres that developed around castles, the term *chōnin* generally referred to craftsmen, merchants and traders.

[4] It used to be written with the character for *kama* (cooking pot) originally referring to the anus and, by implication, to a men penetrated during sex. In the early 2000s there was a debate in Japan about whether it was politically correct to use this word. On this subject, see Lunsing (2005: 81-95).

female eroticism. It goes without saying that both forms of *dōseai* contradicted the assumption that sexuality was exclusively between men and women.

Doctors, psychologist and sexologists began to discuss 'same sex love' as the product of mental or physical degeneracy. Their assumptions spread in educational journals, and in many other forums outside the medical establishment. Therefore, the concept of *dōseai* began to be perceived as something deeply deleterious to health and as a threat to the gender identity of those who practised it. It must be said, however, that there was no univocal view of male desire and that its representation in mass culture and literature tended to be different from the one promoted in the legal, medico-scientific and psychological domains (Angles 2011: 10-11).

The heteronormative interpretation of male-male desire placed great emphasis on the type of sexual intercourse between men, in spite of other elements such as age, roles in and out of bed, and the social status of the partners, which structured relationships in *shudō*. "By focusing on the act and disregarding the spiritual elements incorporated in the *nanshoku* code (particularly the samurai model) critics attempted to divorce homosexuality from *bushidō* culture" (Furukawa & Lockyer 1994: 110).

In this regard, of great impact was the promulgation in 1873 of the Katei Ritsuryō code, Article 266 of which punished cases of sodomy (*keikan*) with imprisonment (Furukawa & Lockyer 1994: 108). The penal code was replaced in 1882 by a new one, modelled after Napoleonic laws and containing no articles against same-sex eroticism. Under the new Keihō code male-male anal intercourse fell into the broader category of 'obscene acts', which were considered illegal and punishable only in case of coercion or minors involved (Pflugfelder 1999: 168). Although the criminalisation of the *keikan* lasted only nine years, it elicited a moralistic response and a debate on same-sex love that would continue in the following decades. There were certainly exceptions and positions that were not always clear-cut and unambiguous, but in general the perception of large sections of society changed: a centuries-old custom now appeared as an immoral act and a manifestation of perversion.

If love and eroticism between men was spoken of, it was temporally and geographically delimited and confined to a specific age group (Pflugfelder 1999: 193-234). *Shudō* was generally understood as a practice characteristic of an outdated feudal past and confined to the domain of the warrior class in some remote southern provinces of Japan where the aesthetics of *bushidō* were most deeply rooted. Also, male-male eroticism drifted to a social space where adult standards were not fully applicable: the world of the adolescent male.

This was due to a number of contingencies such as the reform of the school system in Japan and the politics and media's growing interest in educational issues. Male students generally attracted much attention in public discourse, as they were considered the future leaders of the nation, and their conduct was under constant scrutiny by adult critics. School was supposed to be a time of diligent study, not of sexual entertainment. However, as reported in numerous tabloid articles of the time, it was in all male environments such as boarding schools, dormitories and military barracks that the practice of *shudō* proved to be far from buried in a distant past. A description of life in Meiji school dormitories can be found, for examples, in Mori Ōgai's *Vita Sexualis* (1909). In this largely autobiographical and ironic novel, the writer recounts his first steps in discovering sexuality and mentions that he learned the meaning of *nanshoku* in the school dormitory when he was thirteen years old. He also recalls being himself the object of unsolicited sexual attention by a group of students referred to as *kōha*, who behaved rudely to prove their masculine prowess, avoided contact with girls and chased *bishōnen* (beautiful boys).[5]

The word *bishōnen* at the time generically identified a young student who, having delicate features and a gentle disposition, was assumed to be more likely to take a 'passive' role within the relationship, as theorised in Kōmurō Shujin's *Bishōnenron* (Treatise on Handsome Boys, 1911) (Pflugfelder 1999: 226). The *bishōnen* possessed those characteristics that were traditionally associated not only with youthful male beauty but also with female beauty: snowy white skin, shiny black hair and red cheeks. They were individuals who did not belong entirely to the masculine gender, at least for a phase of their life. In the early decades of the 20th century the image of these pretty schoolboys attracted the interest of artists who created illustrations for the youth market featuring them in various and sometimes exotic poses (Tyler 2008: 31; McLelland 2015: 21-41).[6] While in some cases they were represented according to traditional iconography as a page, a young warrior or an acolyte, in others they had a more modern look. At the end of the Meiji era, the term *bishōnen* was perhaps more apt to evoke the figure of a young student, dressed "in a stylish western-style school uniform" (Pflugfelder 1999: 227).

[5] This was also the case in women's institutes where the type of pretty girl (*bishōjo*) became popular.

[6] This was possible in the context of the development of a vibrant literary culture during the Taishō era (1912-1925) that revolved especially around popular monthly magazines aimed at different readers such as housewives, businessmen, boys and girls.

It is therefore clear that the culture of male-male eroticism far outlasted the turn-of-the-century attempts to eradicate it. With the transition of *shudō* into the world of adolescent students, the subjects involved in male-male relationships were no longer an adult and a boy, but two boys, one of whom may have been older but had not yet entered adulthood. Also, although Ōgai's novel depicts the predatory sexuality of 'hard faction' (*kōha*) students, who, by virtue of their status as senior students, often forced attractive *bishōnen* into a sexual relationship, not all relationships were of this kind. In the literature of Taishō (1912-1926) and Shōwa (1926-1989) era descriptions of more symmetrical and amorous relationships between schoolboys can be found, as is it happens in Tachibana Sotoo's *Nanshoku Monogatari*.

At the same time, however, medical practitioners and educators were concerned about the status of the *bishōnen* once they became adults. Many thought that even the most promising handsome boy, having played the role of passive partner, was unlikely to achieve full masculinity and make a career in life. Others "began to view the *bishōnen* as the youthful phase of a more permanent sexual psychology, whose ultimate trajectory was exclusively male-male sexual interaction and feminine rather than masculine gender identity" (Pflugfelder 1999: 229). Ultimately, it was believed that 'unnatural' practices such as anal intercourse or masturbation could cause incurable physiological and psychological disorders (Pflugfelder 1999: 246).

The picture outlined above shows that during the twentieth century, the perception of male eroticism was far from being homogeneous. It ranged from the aesthetic-literary appreciation of boys' beauty to the celebration of intimate feelings of love and brotherhood among them, to the sexologists' treatment of male-male desire as an innate pathology. Ultimately, it demonstrates that "when people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries spoke of *shudō*, especially in the context of a martial and roughneck culture of male samurai bravado, they were drawing on a profoundly different set of cultural assumptions than when twentieth-century Japanese spoke of "same-sex love" using words such as *dōseiai* that had originated in conjunction with sexological and medical discourse" (Angles 2011: 26).

2. Male–male desire and its manifestations in modernist literature

Tachibana's *Nanshoku Monogatari* does not only echo the socio-cultural discourse that has been outlined so far, but also fits into a modern literary tradition that has described boyhood crushes on other schoolboys, praising the

ephemeral and androgynous beauty of *bishōnen*. Here I will focus on few essential aspects.

Reichert (2006) explains how the age- and role-structured male love of the Tokugawa period, depicted in the works of Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848) and many other early modern writers, retained a certain "cultural prestige" in the Meiji era and still appealed to a large section of the reading community. For this reason, some of the prominent Meiji writers such as Tsubouchi Shōyō, Yamada Bimyō, Kōda Rohan, Natsume Sōseki, and Mori Ōgai struggled to find a balance between the demands of this community and the expectations of the Meiji reformers convinced that "heterosexual desire was the sole natural expression of male sexuality" (2006: 4). They had to find a new literary language in order to realistically represent romantic heterosexual relationships. Reichert' study shows how the creation of an "exclusively heterosexual literary space" (2006: 10), which celebrated heterosexual love as the basis of so-called 'civilisation', was by no means a quick and predictable process, but rather a tortuous and often contradictory one.

Indeed, the theme of same-sex attraction was common in modernist prose in the first decades of the 20th century. Here it is presented, as Tayler argues, "without moral judgement in an uninhibited and often idyllic manner", probably because modernist writers "focused on male-male affection as a kind of backlash or protest against the strong tendency in the Meiji period toward the heteronormalization of culture and literature" (Tyler 2008: 45-6). During the Taishō era, narratives of male-male desire between schoolboys were quite widespread, as were narratives of same-sex desire between schoolgirls. References to handsome boys and same-sex crushes appeared in several stories ascribable to the strand of literary modernism such as *Bishōnen Saraino no kubi* (The Bust of the Beautiful Young Salaino, 1921) by the poet and painter Murayama Kaita (1896–1919), *R-chan to S no hanashi—A Sentimental Episode* (The Story of R-chan and S, 1924) by Inagaki Taruho (1900–1977)[7] and *K no shōten—aruiwa K no dekishi*, (The Ascension of K, 1927) by Kajii Motojirō (1901–1932).[8]

In his study of *bishōnen* culture in the years between the Taishō era (1912-26) and the first decade of the Shōwa era (1926-89), in addition to the aforementioned Murayama Kaita and Inagaki Taruho, Angles focuses also on the production of mystery writer Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965). The three

[7] Inagaki Taruho's treatise *Shōnen'ai no bigaku* (The Aesthetics of Boy's Love, 1958) was among the works that competed for the fourth Tanizaki Prize for Literature in 1968.
[8] For an English translation of these stories see Tyler (2008).

authors addressed the subject of sexual desire in works that became bestsellers in Taishō and early Shōwa (Kaita, Ranpo) or became popular in the post-war literary market (Inagaki). One of the reasons their works appealed to the public was their "willingness to deal with various non-heteronormative aspects of sexual desire, including male-male eroticism" (Angles 2011: 15). Especially since the 1920s and 1930s were characterized by the boom of *hentai* culture, which exalted the appeal of the erotic, the grotesque, and the nonsensical. A cultural phenomenon known as *ero-guro-nansensu* that shone a spotlight on precisely those aspects of human life that strict public morality deemed deviant and perverse.

All three were interested in ancient Greek or pre-modern Japanese texts on erotic or amorous desire involving attractive young men. Also, they depicted egalitarian sentimental relationships between schoolboys that were very different from those found in the works of turn-of-the-century authors. In Angles's words:

> The visions of amorous schoolboy desire described by Kaita, Ranpo, and Taruho stand in stark contrast to the codified, age-graded, "hard-faction" pursuit of male–male sexuality described in Ōgai's novel and in many Meiji treatments of schoolboy life. These three authors are among the earliest of a new generation of authors whose writing describes amorous schoolboy relationships based on an appreciation of *bishōnen* beauty and shared interests, not on the age-graded hierarchical relationships of "hard-faction" boys in the Meiji period or—going back even further—the *nenja/wakashu* pattern of male–male sexuality described so often in Edo texts. This new generation of authors also included Yamazaki Toshio, Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972), Hori Tatsuo (1904–53), and Tachibana Sotō (1894–1959) (Angles 2011: 18).

The account of a crush on a teenage schoolmate with androgynous charm is central to *Shōnen* (The Adolescent,1948-49) by Kawabata Yasunari, the prominent exponent of the so-called neo-sensory school (*shinkankakuha*), epitome of Japanese literary modernism. In this supposed autobiographical novel Kawabata recalls his teenage years, the memory of his parents who died when he was one year old, the education he received from his grandfather, his intellectual growth and the first emotions aroused by a younger schoolmate.

Miyamoto Yasunari is a fifty-year-old novelist who, while editing the celebratory publication of the complete collection of his writings, resumes some of his earlier works, including a diary kept during his youth and a

correspondence with a friend of the time. Much of this material is about a middle school friend named Kiyono with whom the narrator, three years older, shares the same room in a boarding house for about a year. Kiyono is a boy with a meek and gentle character and a feminine appearance, for whom the protagonist feels a love that is reciprocated. In addition to love, however, there is also a physical attraction that is presented as something wrong and therefore to be avoided. So much so that Miyamoto strives to present this relationship in the purest way as a brotherly and friendly affection within the realm of aesthetics. Although in many respects the protagonist appears to be Kawabata's literary alter ego, critics are not unanimous in considering *The Adolescent* as an autobiography of the author (Durante 2020: 126-127). In any case, whether the facts recounted are inspired by real events or not, the relationship between the two schoolmates fits perfectly into the framework of *bishōnen'ai*, (Love for beautiful boy), for the nature of their relationship and the characteristics of the younger ephebic Kiyono. It also shows how much both the author and the protagonist have internalised the rhetoric of 'same sex love' as a degenerate practice. Kawabata's literary persona emphasise the innocent and aesthetic aspect of his youthful emotions, "as if attempting to draw an implicit distinction between the crushes he felt and the erotic behaviour sexologists condemned" (Angles 2011: 20). [9]

3. Tachibana Sotoo and his *Nanshoku Monogatari*

Tachibana Sotoo (橘外男 1894-1959) is a virtually unknown author outside Japan, little read even in Japan and on whom only very few studies are available (Huang 2007). His name appears sporadically in studies on Japanese modernism and is mentioned in the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture* among the authors who wrote about same-sex relationships before and after the Pacific War, together with the aforementioned Inagaki Taruho and Yasunari Kawabata (Gerstner 2006: 325). Apart from the Spanish translation of *Zushi monogatari* (Una historia de Zushi, 1937) (Yáñez & Naito 2022: 129-161) and the English translation of *Sakaba Ruretto funjōki* (Tale of Trouble from the Roulette Bar, 1936), there are no other published translations

[9] Hartley, echoing part of the Japanese critics, argues that in *Shōnen* there is an equal valorisation of women and men as objects of desire. Thus, because the gender of the object of desire seems irrelevant, the novel does not qualify as an example of *shōnen ai* writing. It is rather the ambiguity of ambivalent desire that challenges the hegemonic discourse on gender and sexuality (Hartley 2006: 123-140).

of Tachibana's work available, at least in Western languages. Tyler includes *Sakaba Ruretto funjōki* in his collection of Modernist writers because it displays two features of Japanese Modernist fiction: cosmopolitanism and commercialism, represented by the joint Dutch-Japanese management of a bar in Tōkyō's bustling Ginza district (Tyler 2008: 187-241).

Born in Kanazawa as the third son of Army Infantry Colonel Tachibana Shichisaburō, Tachibana Sotoo grew up in Kumamoto and Takasaki following his father's transfer. He was expelled from the Takasaki junior high school several times, once for blackmailing a younger student. Disowned by his family, he was forced to leave home and move to Hokkaidō. He was left in the care of his uncle who was the director of the Hokkaidō Railway Administration Bureau in Sapporo. He started working for the Railway Administration Office in Sapporo, but at the age of 21, after committing embezzlement, he was sentenced to a one-year imprisonment, which he served in Sapporo's prison. These turbulent vicissitudes of his youth are recalled in his more autobiographical works, including *Nanshoku Monogatari*.

He then moved to Tōkyō where he began writing novels pursuing his passion for literature cultivated since he was a teenager. At the same time, he earned his living working as a sales representative for foreign companies in the medical equipment export business. The first recognition of his literary work came in 1936 when his *Sakaba Ruretto funjōki* won the *Bungeishunjū* (Literary Arts Spring and Fall)[10] magazine's prize for stories that depicted real life (*jitsuwa shōsetsu*). After that, he published in other modernist journals including *Shin seinen* (1920-1950, New Youth), which had been the main venue for the detective fiction. In 1938, he won the 7th Naoki Prize with his most well-known *Narin denka e no kaisō* (Memories of Prince Narin), which tells the story of an Indian prince who, while in Japan for study, is abducted by the British.

He kept writing while working in the business field until the Pacific war curtailed overseas trade. He then moved with his family to Manchuria in 1942 and 1943, working the first time for Manchurian Book Distribution (Manshū shoseki haikyū kabushikigaisha) and the second time for the Manchurian Film Society (Manshūeigakyōkai). The period spent in Manchuria is referred to in a series of novels known as *Manshū-mono* (Manchurian tales) which are based on his first-hand experience of the capture of the present-day city of Changchun by Soviet troops on 20 August 1945. After returning to Japan, he lived as a

[10] The magazine is the flagship product of the publishing company of the same name founded by novelist Kikuchi Kan in 1923. It grants the annual Akutagawa Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Japan, as well as the annual Naoki Prize for popular novelists.

freelance writer writing for various magazines in different genres such as ghost fiction, grotesque fiction, detective fiction, and fiction for young girls. A number of films by Nakagawa Nobuo, a popular film director of the horror genre in the late 1950s and early 1960s, are based on Tachibana's works, e.g., *Chitei no bi niku* (Flesh of Underground Beauty, 1958) adapted into film as *Onna kyūketsuki* (The Vampire Lady, 1959).[11]

According to Yamashita Takeshi, who edited the critical edition of his works, Tachibana Sotoo's writing covers so many different genres that it is difficult to determine which one he is best at. However, in Yamashita's opinion, it is in his humorous fiction that the essence of Tachibana's work is to be found. In terms of content, all of Tachibana's humorous novels have a strong autobiographical element. The author himself appears in the novels under his own name, sometimes as the main character, and the stories are very entertaining. His style is straightforward, informal and plain, almost like the one of a *rakugo*[12] performance (Yamashita 1995: 353-65).

Nanshoku Mongatari (A Tale of Male Love) well exemplifies the humorous vein of Tachibana's fiction. Published serially between October and November 1952 in the monthly entertainment fiction magazine *Ōru Yomimono* (All Yomimono), the novel is structured in eleven chapters, each of which tells an episode from the author's adolescence. They all chronologically refer to the period when Tachibana attended the former Takasaki Junior High School, in the homonymous city located in Gunma Prefecture. The school, founded in 1897, was located on the slopes of Mount Kannon beyond the Hijiribashi Bridge, two toponyms that also recur in *Nanshoku.* Tachibana recounts that every time he walked through the school gate and looked up at the massive two-storey school building looming over his head, the dusky, weather-beaten black structure made him, who was a bad student, feel petty and intimidated (Yamashita 1995: 355).

He only attended this school for three years between the ages of 14 and 17, because after failing one year, he was transferred to Numata Junior High School in the autumn of the fourth year. Apparently, he was one of the seven students expelled from Takasaki Junior High School for participating in the social movement at the time, but no further details are known. There is no

[11] For a detailed biography of the author, see Kusaka Kanzo's afterword to Tachibana's mystery stories (Kusaka 2002: 477-483)

[12] Traditional Japanese comedy theatre still performed today. It consists of a comic monologue in which a storyteller tells a story that includes dialogues between two or more characters played through changes in tone and pitch.

connection between Tachibana and the social movement in any way. Probably, his rebellious attitude, poor conduct and various other circumstances were the cause (Yamashita 1995: 354).

Clearly, the junior high school years were anything but pleasant and Tachibana, looking back on them, admits that it would have been better to study harder and listen to his parents. On the other hand, those were also the years of his first crushes on his classmates and the discovery of his own sexuality, the central themes of *Nanshoku*.

The novel's protagonist is Tachibana Sotoo, a man in his fifties, married with children, who decides to retrace some moments of his restless adolescence and unrequited infatuation with a younger student, Ryōyama Tadamichi, who would later become a famous political scientist. The author's declared intention is not to tell an uplifting tale of male-male love, as the classic-style title would suggest,[13] but to share his personal experience with readers, warning the younger ones not to follow his example. However, the humoristic and at times overtly comic tone of the text does not allow this statement to be taken entirely seriously. Instead, the reader is inclined to sympathize and identify more with the unfortunate Tachibana than with the too-serious Ryōyama.

The adolescent Tachibana is in the midst of the physical and psycho-relational changes characteristic of that age. He has grown in stature, has pimples, is in perpetual conflict with his parents, who would like him to be quiet and studious, has low self-esteem, and is discovering his sexuality through autoeroticism. In the homosocial context of the school, he falls in love with Ryōyama Tadamichi, who is a couple of years younger, is very cute, comes from a wealthy family and is a serious and diligent student.

> When he was fifteen or sixteen, Ryōyama was a truly sharp, small, gallant boy. The buttocks of his trousers were plump and raised like a girl's. He was an old-times country junior high school student, so he wore a cotton uniform with worn elbows, had a sharp face with a dark complexion, pitch-black hair, and was a smart-looking boy. My friends called him Tadami-

[13] *Nanshoku*, as mentioned above, was a word commonly used in the Edo period to indicate male-male eroticism and appears in the title of Ihara Saikaku's famous work, *Nanshoku Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror of Male Love, 1687). *Monogatari*, on the other hand, indicates one of the classic genres of Japanese fiction and is in the title of the celebrated *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, early 11th century). The contrast between the high-sounding title that recalls the quintessence of Japanese literary classicism, and the style and content of the work creates a decidedly comic effect that only becomes apparent when reading.

> chan[14] for short, because they had no idea that in later years he would become a university professor and write difficult, unreadable papers. But he was a lovely boy who deserved to be called Tadami-chan. Even so, he did well at school.
> On the other hand, I was the tallest person in my class with a big stature that looked twice as big as Ryōyama, and I even had a pimple under my nose that was already blowing in the wind. Pimple after pimple, squashed or not, they kept popping up. It is no wonder, then, that I was not a classmate of Ryōyama from the beginning. I should have been in the fourth grade, but I had failed twice in a row, so I was stuck in the same class, and my father and mother were lamenting the fact that I would soon be growing a beard and going to junior high school. However, because I was carefree, I could no longer stand being constantly scolded and called stupid by my parents, and I had no desire whatsoever to continue my studies. Since my father and mother kept saying that sooner or later I would end up working as a boy in a fishmonger's shop or at a cobbler's, I didn't care what would happen to a fool like me, and I took it for granted that I would go to work at a cobbler's shop.
> I don't know about Ryōyama, but I was one of the first to indulge in onanism - junior high school students called this kind of person a masturbator. I was the greatest of these masturbators, studying this lustful pleasure day and night, so my face was pale and swollen, my head was foggy all year round, and I was an apathetic person who may or may not have listened to what the teacher said.
> In a word, I was the epitome of a slow and stupid person. However, my libido was brimming, and since I had not yet experience with a girl and my body was so full it was bursting, it would have been impossible for me to resist the urge to set my eyes on a beautiful boy [*bishōnen*] in the class. But even though it was inevitable to set my eyes on a beautiful boy [*bishōnen*], when it turned out that this dull man I wanted as a lover was Ryōyama, the political scientist, I felt I had made a terrible mistake. People may say that they feel sorry for Ryōyama, but I feel sorrier for myself (Tachibana 1995: 8-10).

The quoted passage introduces one of the key elements that make Tachibana's dreamed relationship impossible. Until adulthood, Tachibana is beset by a constant sense of moral and intellectual inferiority to Tadamichi who, being a bright and promising student, has nothing to learn from a senior student who has failed several times. There is thus a total ironic reversal of the centuries-old

[14] The diminutive suffix *chan* indicates that the speaker finds a person adorable and endearing. In general, *chan* is used to call babies, children and teenage girls. Friends and lovers may also address each other with this diminutive.

pattern typical of *nanshoku*, in which the older lover should take care of the younger one, even providing for him financially and contributing to his education and inner growth. Although, as will be seen below, it is precisely that idealised knightly model of love relationships that is taken as a reference by the young Tachibana.

The situation described is also reminiscent of the modernist strand that devotes attention to the sentimental affairs of students and in particular to the love of *bishōnen*. The young Tachibana has a crush on Ryōyama. All he does is thinking about him, he is jealous of the cute friends Ryōyama has, and cannot refrain from visiting him at home, despite Ryōyama's obvious disinterest and his exhortations not to turn up at his door. At school Tachibana spends his time gazing at Ryōyama. In his notebook, next to the clumsy sketches of beautiful women in the style of then popular painter Takehisa Yumeji (1884-1934), he writes the name of Hirata Sangorō. A famous *bishōnen* from Satsuma who lived in the 16th century and represented the *nanshoku* of the early modern age in the samuraic world. [15] He does so despite knowing that if the teacher saw the notebook, he would certainly treat him as a sexual pervert (*tōsaku seiyokusha*).

In the chapter ironically entitled 'The First Failed Marriage' (*Shokon shippai*) Tachibana tells us how impatience and sexual urge led him to try everything to seduce Ryōyama and make him his *chigo*.[16] Under the pretext of having to tell him something important, he drags him to the riverbank on a cold winter day. He also brings *miso manjū*[17] to offer his friend, hoping that by winning his sympathy, he will convince him to agree to have sex with him. Ryōyama, however, is not hungry and only wants to go home because he is cold. He also does not understand what Tachibana's intentions are because he does

[15] His love affair with the samurai Yoshida Okura and his martial exploits are recounted in the Edo period work *Shizu no odamaki* (Humble Bobbin). Traditionally, Satsuma's domain was associated with the practice of *shudō* to the extent that the expression 'Satsuma's habit' was used to refer to male-male sexuality (Pflugfelder 1999: 209-10).

[16] Often translated as 'acolyte'. This is how were called in Edo-era popular literature the 'beautiful boys' that the Buddhist priests fell in love with. They were also called *terakoshō* (temple page). They were male adolescent, generally laymen, who were often sent to serve in a temple or monastery to receive an education. Aside from performing domestic chores, they commonly shared the beds of older monks. "The figure of the acolyte played a central role in medieval writings on male-male eroticism" (Pflugfelder 1999: 74). A famous example is the *Chigo Monogatari*, written around 1377, which reports stories of monks' sexual relations with their acolytes (Leupp 1995: 40)

[17] A kind of steamed bun popular in Gunma prefecture.

not know, or pretends not to know, the vocabulary of the *nanshoku*. The tragicomic episode ends with Ryōyama running away.

> This impatience made me one day drag Ryōyama out to a nearby riverbank with a string of nice things to say.
> "What do you want to talk about? Tachibana! You can talk to me here", he sniffed. But I succeeded in dragging him out to the riverbank, anyway. It was a cold day in the early morning, with the wind still blowing fiercely. […] I was willing to risk this terrible cold and behave strangely if only Ryōyama would agree to it. I was so surprised at the ferocity of my sexual desire at the time.
> "I'm cold and I can't stand it! Tachibanaa, please tell me quickly, Tachibanaa!"
> The guy always had the strange habit of calling me 'Tachibanaa', with the accent on the 'a', and pulling it out for a strangely long time.
> […] The idea of my beloved Tadami and I sitting on a deserted riverbank, eating and talking over *miso manjū*, and finally getting down on all fours and having fun on the boys' path [*chigo no michi*], had been in my mind since the night before, but I had not expected the wind to blow like this.
> […] "It's so cold, I feel like I'm going to die. I don't want to eat *miso manjū*! Hurry up and tell me what you want, Tachibana!" Ryōyama urged me again.
> "It's no big deal, I'll talk to you while you eat! Eat up, Ryōyama!". I held out a *miso manjū*.
> The curtain had fallen on the night and it was pitch black. The *miso manjū* I held out to him was instantly rejected by the angry Ryōyama. "If I don't want to eat it, I don't want to eat it!". I was knocked off.
> […] "You idiot! You're making fun of me! Why did you call me up here, saying you want to talk to me! I'm going home! I'm going home!".
> He was about to walk away, so there was no time to hesitate. If I had hesitated, I would have missed my chance.
> "Ryōyama! I was going to tell you earlier, but…", I stood in Ryōyama's way.
> "I like you!" I said in an uneasy voice with my nose dripping.
> "So what? Tell me quickly! I'm going home!"
> If I had been a Kabuki actor, I would have put on a great show at this point and expressed my feelings clearly […] but it was too cold and chilly to do anything about it.
> […] "I like you, ... I like you, give me your honourable hole [*okama*]!" I gasped and sounded like a sleepwalker. "Just once, ... Just once! For God's sake!"
> "What's the 'honourable hole'?
> The wind was blowing so hard that the beautiful boy kept sneezing in the darkness.

"You don't know what the 'honourable hole' is ?!"
It was so cold; I couldn't bear anymore! The honourable hole was important too, but I also wanted to fly home all at once.
"Ryōyama, sleep here with me! I'm going to be a brother [*kyōdai*] to you, so sleep here!"
My word 'brother' meant only a momentary brotherhood in the sense of *nanshoku*, but this bastard[18] who didn't know what I was talking about, must have thought that I, a dropout, had really volunteered to be a brother.
"Why should I be your brother? Don't be stupid! I don't want to be your brother!", he spat out a furious rebuke. He was a very troublesome son of a bitch. I couldn't bend him over all of a sudden.
"Tachibana! I'm going to catch a cold, don't you understand?"
"I don't care if you catch a cold, just lie down and sleep with me! I love you, so lie down and sleep with me!". I gave him a firm order.
"What the hell, Tachibana! I don't understand what you're saying at all. Why do you want to sleep in such a place?"
"I don't care if you understand or not, just sleep with me! If you get bullied by someone else, I'll save you". Sneezing, I declared that I would defend him with my muscle, since I couldn't be of any help in his studies.
"I'm cold, too, ... and I'll be done soon. Hey, shut up and lie down quickly! Come on, Tadamichi! This is all I ask you, and you still won't lie down?" I finally threw a tantrum.
"What the hell, are you trying to pick a fight with me!? Tachibanaa, you're being really mean! You said you had something to do. You dragged me out and now you're trying to pick a fight with me!" Ryōyama was also furious and attacked me from within the darkness.
"I'm leaving! I'm leaving, I'm leaving!
"Wait a minute, I want to talk to you about something really important! Hey, you Ryōyama!". I was so out of my mind that I grabbed this frog-like bastard who was running back home. He didn't know what I was talking about. I didn't drag him out to fight! I couldn't help it if he couldn't swallow the fact that I had dragged him there to cuddle him. When I tried to explain it, he got all pissed off saying "What's the 'honourable hole'? Why sleep here?" ... I had already half given up on that bastard's hole.
If his honourable hole was off limits I had to surrender, but after opening fire I couldn't let him go by simply saying goodbye. I had started talking about love and all I had to do was put on a good face and keep my dignity. However, Ryōyama mistakenly understood my grabbing him as a sudden

[18] Although the expression *kono yarō* (this bastard, son of a bitch) may sound derogatory, in the story it is used with an affectionate meaning. A similar usage is found in *A Tale of Trouble from the Bar Roulette*, where, as Tyler notes, Tachibana refers in this way to his unreliable Dutch business partner, whom he regards with a mixture of condescension and affection. (Tyler 2008: 185)

> attempt to hug him. He wriggled furiously, shook my hand and scratched it so hard that it left a red welt on it. As soon as I let go, he ran away kicking stones from the bank.
> "That's why I ..... hate you so much! You're always acting like a wolf, ... and I hate you because you're stubborn, ... that's why you keep flunking out of school!".
> Ryōyama's voice shouting in exasperation as he galloped away could be heard intermittently, crackling on the gravel on the opposite bank of the river in the darkness. It is true that when one feels in danger one resorts to any means, but that bastard took the chance to hit me right where it hurt the most (Tachibana 1995: 15-20).

Despite his vehement tone and brusque manner, reminiscent of the attitude of the *kōha* mentioned by Ōgai, the young Tachibana, like any teenager, feels great embarrassment in expressing his feelings, trying to appear much more confident than he is. All he knows about love and sex is what he has learned from reading stories about knights or looking at erotic prints, and he is unprepared to deal with Tadamichi's reaction. Furthermore, while insisting on the 'way of the youths', he is aware that this practice could be judged as a form of 'depravity' by adults.

Nevertheless, after overcoming the bitter humiliation, Tachibana successfully courts other younger boys, creating his own harem of *chigo*. His sexual activity is so intense that his eyesight is debilitated for a while, and he is therefore forced to eat roasted lamprey meat every night. This episode indirectly makes fun of the pseudo-scientific beliefs that masturbation and sodomy were a source of disease for boys' health and therefore a threat to the welfare of the nation (Fruhstuck 2000: 342).

Despite having hurt him once, Ryōyama still remains in Tachibana's thoughts. Some time later, since his parents do not give him any pocket money, Tachibana turns to him for borrowing money. Under the pretext of wanting to share with his friend the cost of purchasing the voluminous translation of Shakespeare's works edited by Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935), Tachibana obtains the loan from Ryōyama, who, however, begins pestering him repeatedly asking to see the volumes. The debt will eventually be repaid at a turning point in Tachibana's life.

Hidematsu, one of his *chigo*, becomes infatuated with Tachibana's cousin and begs him to write him a letter to arrange a meeting with the girl. Tachibana is reluctant, but agrees for the sake of his affection for the boy. Carelessly, however, he signs the letter on his behalf. The letter ends up in the hands of

Tachibana's parents who, exasperated by his recurrent misbehaviour, decide to kick him out of the family, leaving him in the care of an uncle in Sapporo. The day before his departure, Ryōyama shows up at his house, but not for the last affectionate goodbye Tachibana had dreamed of, but to finally get his money back.

The story ends with the description of a meeting between Tachibana and Ryōyama in a train carriage in Tōkyō twelve years later. The two sit in the same compartment, but while Tachibana recognises Ryōyama, the latter does not notice him. Tachibana is now a grown man who spends what he earns on food and geisha, while Ryōyama is a brilliant university professor. Although years have passed and Ryōyama now looks like an anonymous receptionist, a sense of inadequacy and inferiority still haunts Tachibana, who rushes out of the train hoping not to be seen. He spends the rest of the day in a state of despondency that not even the attentions of a geisha, whom he has promised to redeem, can soothe.

> In any case, the man called Ryōyama has been an enigmatic person for me. He was my first love when I was a boy, he made me experience the pain of debt for the first time in my life, and when I met him twelve years later, he messed my feelings up so badly that I decided not to redeem my geisha. Whenever I pass by Higashi-Nakano station […], I can't help but thinking of my enigmatic friend with a feeling that is indescribably complex and bizarre. (Tachibana 1995: 87-8).

Yamashita recalls that the two actually met again after forty-six years and there is a photograph of the meeting that shows them sitting and chatting amicably at a table. However, it is not known what they actually said to each other on that occasion (Yamashita 1995: 365).

3. Conclusion

Tachibana Sotoo's *Nanshoku Monogatari* is part of a literary tradition that has depicted various forms of male-male eroticism, in particular the one involving beautiful young boys.

Tachibana is an adolescent right at the end of the Meiji era, a period in which on the one hand a certain admiration for the samurai practice of *shudō* survived, while on the other hand new discourses framing same-sex love as a sexual deviance arose in the medical and legal spheres. Tachibana has

relationships with younger schoolmates that in their dynamics and terminology recall, with some humorous reversals, those of *shudō*.

However, he also perceives the social stigma surrounding this type of relationship. It is worth remembering that those were the years of legal campaigns to oppose the growing phenomenon of delinquent students attacking *bishōnen* in so-called *chigo* battles (Furukawa & Lockyer 1994: 112). When Tachibana has sexual intercourse with the young Kuroda, he even wonders whether it is not criminally punishable as an 'obscene act' against a minor according to the Keihō code (Tachibana 1995: 24).

Also, although they still trouble him in his thirties, his same-sex experiences are confined to his boyhood. The adult Tachibana is 'regularly' married to a woman and has children, and despite the ambiguous ending, the story seems to exclude the possibility that he feels attraction for other men even in adulthood. And even assuming that he does feel it, talking about it openly in the 1950s was still a taboo. Male homosexual relationships between adults were experienced with a certain sense of guilt and only as long as they did not damage the reputation of the individual, who was often forced into a cover marriage to avoid arousing suspicion about his sexual preferences (Usai 2022: 155-162). As, incidentally, also emerges quite clearly in Mishima Yukio's *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours, 1951-3).[19]

Ultimately, from a literary point of view, the *Nanshoku Monogatari* provides a vivid and realistic depiction of the turbulent period of adolescence in a turn-of-the-century homosocial context. It also has some documentary value because it reflects ongoing social changes in the discourse on gender and sexuality. However, although the depiction of adolescent same-sex relationships is devoid of moral judgment, precisely because they are confined to a specific age and a transitional phase, they do not seem to challenge the prevailing heteronormative paradigm that was firmly in place in 1950s Japan. They defy, if anything, a model of assertive and dominant masculinity.

[19] Mishima does not denigrate homosexuality at the expense of a supposed ideal of heterosexual masculinity, but the world of male homosexuality he represents is a separate and problematic one, that offers few positive images (McLelland 2000: 24-28).

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