THE DIVINE VICTIM:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SAKURA-HIME FROM SAKURA-HIME AZUMA BUNSHŌ

by

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Abstract

The play *Sakura-hime azuma bunshō*, written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV in 1817, has often been read as a parody designed to undermine the sacredness of the Buddhist institution during the Edo period. Upon closer reading, however, this play is not just showing the hypocrisy of the Buddhist institution and its followers. Nanboku, through *Sakura-hime*, is mounting a veiled criticism against the bakufu by elevating what was considered unorthodox religious practices. By rendering the play’s protagonist, Sakura-hime, as a reincarnation of the bodhisattva Kannon, while directly associating her with the Yoshida family and their Shinto practices, Nanboku IV places popular religious ideas on levels equal to state-sponsored religions. Just as the plot of the play could only be resolved through the awakening of Sakura-hime to her divine nature and her intervention, Nanboku IV implicitly suggests that the dire state-of-affairs that plagued the bakufu from the latter half of the 18th century up until the performance of the play in 1817 can only be resolved through a similar divine intervention by a saviour descending from a heterodox belief system. Furthermore, as Sakura-hime becomes the representation of the divine, she also becomes a grotesque figure, the embodiment of contradictory social values, highlighting the arbitrariness of the strict value system that was the cornerstone of Edo society. Salvation and rectification lie within the hands of someone that transcends Edo values, signifying the weakness of the system itself.

I argue for this reading of *Sakura-hime azuma bunshō* by first establishing the historical circumstances that surrounded the writing of this play (Chapter 2). After this, the majority of my argument focuses on outlining the divine nature of Sakura-hime. The textual lineage of the narrative (Chapter 3), as well as the identity of Sakura-hime constructed by key scenes (Chapter 4) will serve this purpose. Finally, a quick look at the role historically played by the Yoshida
family and the construction of Sakura-hime as a grotesque figure (Chapter 5), followed by a few concluding words (Chapter 6), wraps up my argument.
Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Vincent Wing Chung Chan.
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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

My argument concerns the interpretation of the character, Sakura-hime, the protagonist of the play *Sakura-hime azuma bunshō* (hereafter, *Sakura-hime*), written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV, and first performed in 1817. I argue that this play presents a veiled social critique of the late Edo period, namely the years roughly between 1770 and 1817. This approach differs from most of the research on *Sakura-hime* conducted mostly in Japanese, which argues that the play undermines the sacredness of Buddhism through parody - not an uncommon theme among stories of the time – as opposed to having social critique as its primary objective. Although I would agree that parody is an important element within the play, the element of social criticism is apparent – an element that is often overshadowed by the more obvious and eye-catching comedic features of the play. In the reading I offer, Sakura-hime should be seen as the manifestation of the bodhisattva Kannon; the social criticism within *Sakura-hime* is intricately linked with the religious notions that are ever present, both implicitly and explicitly, within the play. These religious notions stretch beyond the realms of Buddhism and into popular religions. The goal of this play is not to undermine the legitimacy of Buddhism, but to render popular religions as equally valid alternatives to Buddhism. First, however, a quick synopsis of *Sakura-hime* is in order.

The play starts off with the monk, Seigen, and his acolyte, Shiragiku, on top of a cliff in E-no-shima. Determined to commit double suicide due to their illicit love affair, Shiragiku leaps to his death. Seigen, on the other hand, refuses to follow-through on his promise to Shiragiku, and chooses to live on. The play then fast-forwards seventeen years. Seigen has since then,

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become the abbot of Shin Kiyomizu-dera. Meanwhile, a succession dispute has broken out in the
Yoshida feudal house due to the murders of the original head of the house and his heir, as well as
the theft of the heirloom necessary for the legitimate transfer of power, the *miyakodori* scroll. As
a result, Seigen is entrusted with the task of resolving this succession dispute. This is all part of
a plan by an ambitious retainer to take over the Yoshida house, but the person who is hired to do
all the dirty work is a man named Gonsuke, the younger brother of Seigen. Members of the
Yoshida family thus head to Shin Kiyomizu-dera in hopes of convincing Seigen to speak in their
favor. Sakura-hime, the seventeen year-old princess of the Yoshida house, also shows up, asking
Seigen to cure her strange defect – her left hand has been clenched since birth – and to be
ordained as a nun. This aliment is quickly cured by Seigen’s prayers, but from Sakura-hime’s left
hand falls the lid of an incense box etched with the Seigen’s name; Seigen thus realizes that
Sakura-hime is the reincarnation of Shiragiku. Seigen then leaves Sakura-hime to prepare for her
ordination.

Gonsuke shows up at this time and refuses to hand over the *miyakodori* scroll until he is
given 2,000 ryō of gold. His employer, the ambitious Akugorō, complies with Gonsuke’s wish
on the condition that Gonsuke delivers his lover-letter to Sakura-hime. Gonsuke takes the letter
to Sakura-hime, only to find out that Sakura-hime is the woman that he had raped on the same
night that he murdered Sakura-hime’s father and stole her family heirloom. Sakura-hime also
realizes that Gonsuke is – in her mind – the mysterious lover from that night. The two proceed to
consummate their love in the temple, but are soon discovered. Gonsuke manages to slip out
before anyone sees him, and after much debate, Seigen declares himself to be Sakura-hime’s
partner in hopes of winning her heart. The two of them are the banished to the banks of Inase
River and reduced to outcaste status. It is also revealed that Sakura-hime had actually given birth
to Gonsuke’s child after their first encounter. This child is then taken hostage by the evil retainer and taken away. Sakura-hime escapes the Inase River banks in search of her child, who ultimately ends up in Seigen’s hands.

Seigen and Sakura-hime’s child takes refuge with one of Seigen’s old assistant monks, who had schemed to take over the abbotship from Seigen but failed, and his wife, an old maid of Sakura-hime. Meanwhile, the wife of a Yoshida house retainer shows up in search of Sakura-hime’s child, whom the old assistant monk is happy to give away and does. Seeing that Seigen is nothing but trouble, and greedy for Seigen’s money, the old assistant monk and his wife decide to poison Seigen, and though they fail (leaving a large scar on Seigen’s face), they proceed to beat Seigen senseless. Thinking that he is dead, they hire Gonsuke, who is now a grave-digger, to bury Seigen. A slave trader also shows up with his newest find, who is none other than Sakura-hime. He has been given permission by Seigen’s old assistant to hide Sakura-hime there while the slave trader goes to make a deal with the local brothel. Taking advantage of the situation, Seigen’s old assistant attempts to rape Sakura-hime, but he is stopped by Gonsuke, who kicks the old assistant and his wife out, and takes over the property for himself. Gonsuke then leaves to find the slave trader, leaving only Sakura-hime and Seigen behind. A lightning bolt then revives Seigen. The two confront each, with Seigen telling Sakura-hime of her past life, and Sakura-hime killing Seigen. After Seigen’s death, Gonsuke returns with Seigen’s scar now transferred onto his face. He buries Seigen and sells Sakura-hime to the brothel.

An undisclosed amount of time passes. Gonsuke is now a landowner, who, upon finding an abandoned child (who turns out to be his and Sakura-hime’s son) during a shift with his fellow townsmen on the night watch, agrees to care for the child in exchange for a payment of gold from his peers. The ambitious retainer from earlier shows up again to ask for the
miyakodori scroll, but is easily killed by Gonsuke. It is revealed that while the child of Sakura-hime was in the custody of a Yoshida retainer, this retainer disguised himself as a gambler and sold the child for cash. This retainer also took a loan from the moneylender that he has no way of repaying. Gonsuke dispatches the moneylender for him, but then demands a payment in gold for the child, or the wife of the Yoshida retainer as a nurse for the child. A deal is made that results in Gonsuke’s possession of the young wife. At this point, Sakura-hime shows up with the slave-trader again; apparently a ghost (the spirit of Seigen) shows up whenever she sleeps with a customer, and thus she is no longer wanted. Refusing to repay the slave trader what Gonsuke initially received for selling Sakura-hime, he instead offers the young wife as a replacement for Sakura-hime in the brothel. After the slave trader leaves with the young wife, Gonsuke is called to a town meeting with promises of money and alcohol, leaving only Sakura-hime and the child in their home. As Sakura-hime takes this opportunity to rest, Seigen’s ghost appears and reveals to Sakura-hime that the child is her son. Sakura-hime is relieved to finally find her child, but before cradling him, she takes Gonsuke’s sword and banishes Seigen’s ghost. Gonsuke returns after all this has taken place. Being completely drunk, he dismisses the idea that the child is related to him, and attempts to remove the child from his presence, and in the process, drops a letter between himself and the ambitious retainer from earlier. Sakura-hime picks up and reads the letter. Hoping to learn more, she proceeds to further intoxicate Gonsuke with alcohol, and in the end, Gonsuke brags about his murder of Sakura-hime’s father and brother, as well as his theft of the miyakodori scroll before falling asleep intoxicated. Sakura-hime at last takes up a sword and kills Gonsuke and their son.

In the last scene of the play, a retainer of the Yoshida house carries Sakura-hime and the Yoshida heirloom back to his lord while evading guards in pursuit of the murderer of Gonsuke.
The play ends at the height of the pursuit. Though no clear resolution is presented, it is clear that the Yoshida house will be restored, and the rightful heir will inherit the clan headship.

I will look first at the historical circumstances of the Edo period between 1770 and 1817. Because *Sakura-hime* was first performed in 1817, the years between 1770 and 1817 were crucial for both the playwright, Tsuruya Nanboku IV, and the audience in terms of the production and reception of this play. The anxieties within society as a whole, given the events that took place between 1770 and 1817, affected both the writer and the audience of *Sakura-hime*; Nanboku and his audience projected their anxieties onto the play. Though this particular moment in history was one that is curiously counter-ideological, the rumblings of social unrest in society at large cannot be ignored.

The second thing I wish to look at is the development of the *sekai* ("world") of *Sakura-hime*. Almost every *kabuki* play written during the Edo period is based on pre-established storylines, or "narrative worlds," and *Sakura-hime* is no different. It is generally accepted that the narrative world of *Sakura-hime* is comprised of two different *sekai*, both of which have heavy religious overtones. These two *sekai* are the *Sumida-gawa mono* and the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*; the former being the narrative world originating from the *noh* play, *Sumida-gawa*, written by Kanzei Motomasa during the Muromachi period, about a mother in search of her child, while the latter is a *kabuki* creation centred on the lust of the monk Seigen for Sakura-hime. As a playwright, Nanboku would have been extremely familiar with the religious implications of both these *sekai*. The religious messages that are a crucial part of these two *sekai* would also have been known by the theatregoers of 1817 and will be the focus of this section. It will be clear that the connection between Sakura-hime and Kannon within the imagination of the audience is firmly established by the religious overtones of the *sekai*. In other words, Nanboku’s rendition of
Sakura-hime as a manifestation of Kannon in *Sakura-hime* relied upon an established connection between Sakura-hime and Kannon found in the first of many *Seigen Sakura-hime mono, Isshin niga byakudō* (1673), and through this connection he was able to critique the society of Edo Japan.

For my analyses of the text of *Sakura-hime* itself, I will be using a translation of *Sakura-hime* by James Brandon in his collection, *Kabuki: Five Classic Plays*. Looking closely at the text then, I wish to focus primarily on the opening and the ending of *Sakura-hime* as they are crucial in establishing the divinity of Sakura-hime.

One of the key scenes of Nanboku’s invention is the prologue of *Sakura-hime*. This scene is crucial in establishing the identity of Sakura-hime as more than just a princess of the Yoshida House. It is in this scene that Nanboku makes explicit the *nanshoku* relationship (that is, a male–male sexual relationship) between Seigen and Shiragiku, who is Sakura-hime in a previous life. This *nanshoku* relationship is important in understanding the role of Sakura-hime given that the audience is led to believe that Sakura-hime and Shiragiku are one and the same. More importantly, the relationship between a monk and his *chigo* (‘acolyte’) has a much deeper implication than just romance or lust. Shiragiku’s role as Seigen’s *chigo* carries with it a religious significance, because the figure of the *chigo* had long been seen as divine and was often portrayed as a manifestation of bodhisattvas or other important Buddhist figures in a variety of media. While it is true that the prologue of *Sakura-hime* is a very short scene that takes place before the main plot even starts, the identity of Sakura-hime as Shiragiku is referenced

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3 For an overview of the variety of media that the *chigo* is used to portray holy Buddhist figures, see Christine M. E. Guth, “The Divine Boy in Japanese Art.” *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 1 – 23.
repeatedly throughout the play, ensuring the audience of the importance of Sakura-hime’s dual-identity. Regarding the ending of *Sakura-hime*, there are a number of plot developments that point to the divinity of Sakura-hime in its fully realized form that need to be addressed, especially regarding Sakura-hime’s descent into the licensed quarters and her triumph over Gonsuke, the primary villain of *Sakura-hime*. Lastly, I will look in depth at the finale of *Sakura-hime*, which directly associates Sakura-hime with Kannon. This section will thus focus on establishing Sakura-hime as a divine figure. One should note that my focus here is the use of various religious ideas in restoring order to the world, as opposed to the exposure of a crumbling sacredness of the religious institution – a view that is supported mostly through a parodic reading of *Sakura-hime*. The necessity of a divine intervention in correcting fundamentally human problems serves to undermine the power of the governing mechanism (that is the lords of the Yoshida House), and is meant to be a reflection of the situation of Edo in the late 18th to early 19th century.

Lastly, I want to look at how *Sakura-hime* can be read as a social critique. I will do this by looking at the significance of the Yoshida house in history and the way they are presented within the play. I will also be applying the idea of the grotesque, as used by Katsuya Hirano in his discussion of another play by Tsuruya Nanboku IV, to Sakura-hime because she is the embodiment of various dichotomies.\(^4\) Sakura-hime shows the audience the absurdity of the prescribed social order by allowing the coexistence of seemingly contradictory elements within her, which arguably enables her triumph over Gonsuke –through these societal contradictions Sakura-hime is able to restore order to the world.

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Chapter 2: The Historical Context: Famines, Threats, and Popular Religion

The first thing that I wish to address is the historical moment in which Sakura-hime was produced. That the Edo period, especially between 1770 and 1820, was fairly unstable, both internally and externally, is well known. As such, I will only focus on certain points that I think were particularly influential on the production and reception of Sakura-hime. The first among these is the Tenmei famine of the 1780s. The Tenmei famine was one of the most devastating famines of the Edo period, and the repercussions it had on society cannot be overstated. The government was helpless when it came to feeding the poor and starving, and as a result of this many of those in dire straits came rushing into major city centres, like Osaka and Edo, in search of aid. Unfortunately, all they found upon arriving at these urban centres were high food prices, due to the sudden increase in demand. As a result, “[r]obbery became common, along with arson, as people punished the privileged or covered their own criminal tracks. The vulnerable were abandoned, thrown out, and some eventually cannibalized.” It is safe to assume that, for the people of Edo Japan, the government’s inability to help those in need and to keep food prices in check during the Tenmei famine resulted in a loss of confidence in the government’s capability to protect and to provide for those in need. Anxieties undoubtedly rose during such dire times, and I think plays like Sakura-hime helped to alleviate these anxieties by representing a similar situation on stage, allowing its audience to draw associations freely between what they saw and what they were experiencing in reality.

Domestically, the bakufu had failed to deal with the major issues like the Tenmei famine. Internationally, the bakufu also faced serious challenges in the form of foreign incursions. From

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6 Ibid, 240.
the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, the *sakoku* policy (literally, “chaining off the state” but more broadly referring to a series of isolationist policies designed to do away with all western contact from Japan with the notable exception of the Dutch, who were confined to a small island in Nagasaki) established by the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu (r. 1623 – 1651), was repeatedly challenged by the appearance of foreign vessels on the shores of the Edo polity and off Hokkaidō. Two incidents of foreign incursion into Japanese borders relevant to the timeframe that I am focusing on here are the Russian incursions from the north and various British vessels that showed up in the south. The trouble with the Russians from the 1790s to 1813 involved the contested territorial claims regarding the control of Ezo, or modern-day Hokkaidō, which resulted in the deaths of many Japanese settlers and the capture of Russian officers. As for the British vessel the *Phaeton*, its appearance on the shores of Nagasaki in 1808, and the British capture of a Dutchman for interrogation, led to an extremely tense situation. Other British vessels followed in the *Phaeton*’s wake. The British, hungry for trade, “tried to approach Japan’s leaders more directly, with ships reaching Uraga in 1816, 1817, and 1818.” In the end, none of these conflicts led to all-out war. However, though the outcomes were relatively peaceful, these events reflected poorly on the Edo *bakufu* due to a lack of swift and successful action taken by the government in dealing with these crises. Despite the best efforts of the *bakufu*, news of these events did manage to spread to every corner of the polity. Such news, signifying the weakening of a government built on its martial prowess, no doubt added to the anxieties of the people.

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7 Ibid, 482 – 493.
8 Ibid, 494 - 496.
9 Ibid, 498.
10 Ibid, 490.
The last issue I wish to address regarding the history of Edo Japan from 1770 to 1820 is the development of popular religion as a response to the growing anxieties of the common people and the rise of millenarian thought – that is, the belief that a supernatural being will come and restore the world to a perfect state, free from present-day problems – within popular religion. Although the development of popular religion during the latter half of the Edo period is well documented, and thus requires little explanation here, some features of this development are important for my current analysis of *Sakura-hime* and need to be noted. First and foremost is that the development of popular religion largely reflects a loss of confidence in the government in providing for and protecting the people in future times of need. This lack of confidence is not unreasonable given the poor reaction by the government in dealing with crises like the Tenmei famine and the foreign incursions of Russia and Britain. In other words, because followers of popular religions can see a future where all their present problems are resolved, all order is re-established, and all good deeds rewarded, they are able to bear with the injustice and imperfections of their current state-of-affairs.

Second, the majority of the subscribers to popular religious movements tend to be those alienated from political power. Between 1770 and 1820, those alienated from political power would have been the peasants, outcastes, and the majority of the *chōnin* (or “townspeople”). Because they lacked a platform to voice their opinions of dissent, popular religion became a

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11 A good example that illustrates this connection between a loss of confidence in the government and popular religious beliefs can be found in the beliefs of Ōshio Heihachirō, the leader of the rebellion of Ōsaka in 1837. He and his followers believed “that only a ‘restoration of the Age of Gods’ (*Jindai fukkō*) could ameliorate the corruption of the times.” See Irwin Scheiner, “The Mindful Peasant: Sketches for a Study of Rebellion,” *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 32, no. 4 (August 1973): 586.

12 Those critical of the government’s handling of the situation were many, and they ranged from nativist scholars to political outcastes. For some common responses to the government’s actions, see Totman, 457 and Totman 466.
convenient avenue for them openly to defy the established order.\textsuperscript{13} Instead of depending on government intervention or human innovation, popular religion gives hope through the promise of supernatural restoration to a time of stable prosperity – something that the bakufu had failed to provide. A similar idea is presented by Steven Heine in his analysis of the various double-suicide plays by Chikamatsu, where he claims that by choosing to commit suicide and placing their faith in the power of Amida, the protagonists are choosing to openly defy the social structure imposed on them; by relating themselves to the ultimate source of power in Amida, they are escaping the authority of the Edo bakufu.\textsuperscript{14}

Third, popular religion during the second half of the Edo period, more often than not, involved a millenarian figure – someone who will restore order and harmony to the current state of chaos in which believers think they currently reside (some would even argue that this is a common trait among all peasant rebellions across time and space).\textsuperscript{15} As for the identity of this millenarian saviour, within Buddhism, it often boils down to one of two possibilities. One common identity for this saviour is that of a bodhisattva. Among them, the most popular are Miroku, the Buddha of the future, followed by Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion.\textsuperscript{16}

Another common identity often attributed to the saviour of popular religious movements is that of the yonaoshi daimyōjin, or “the God of World Renewal.”\textsuperscript{17} While this latter identity clearly tried to differentiate itself from the Buddhist ideas of the former, unless the particular person in question was well trained in kokugaku, the difference between a bodhisattva and a yonaoshi daimyōjin would not have been great. For the average person in the Edo period, these two

\textsuperscript{14} Heine, 367 – 369.
\textsuperscript{16} Totman, 445 – 446.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 447.
identities were by no means mutually exclusive. What was important for the subscribers of popular religion was not the exact identity of the saviour (though knowing who he or she was might help with prayers and rituals) but the belief that whoever the saviour was, he or she will help return their world from the current state of chaos and decline to an earlier state of order and prosperity.
Chapter 3: The Literary Context: Building Blocks and Established Trends

Next, let us situate Tsuruya Nanboku IV within these historical circumstances. Just who was Tsuruya Nanboku IV and to what degree would he have been involved in the dire situations of the second half of the Edo period? Tsuruya Nanboku IV was born in the year 1755 and died in 1829, his original name was Katsuta Genzō. Like the names of famous kabuki actors such as Ichikawa Danjūrō, the name Tsuruya Nanboku was passed from one generation to the next and, for the playwright of Sakura-hime, this was a name that he did not inherit until he was fifty-seven years old. Nanboku belonged officially to the merchant class, but because his family ran a dyeing business, their status in reality was closer to that of outcaste – their home was located fairly close to the theatre district of Edo, which was not a place wealthy and respectable merchants chose for their homes. Perhaps because of this, Nanboku was attracted to the world of kabuki from a young age, and in 1776, he decided to leave the family business to his brother and pursue his dream of becoming a playwright. Finally in 1780, Nanboku married the daughter of Tsuruya Nanboku III and became part of the Tsuruya household, enabling him to inherit the “Tsuruya Nanboku” name when he became chief playwright in 1811.

What this brief biography of Nanboku suggests is that Nanboku would have been in the middle of the social turmoil I have noted above. As stated previously, city centres such as Edo had been the centre of action during times of famine, as the poor and hungry streamed into major cities in search of government aid. Edo would also have been the centre for any sort of rumours about the government; and news of foreign incursions must have circulated in Edo. Furthermore,

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19 Ibid, 5.
20 Ibid, 18.
21 Ibid, 21 – 22.
22 Ibid, 25.
the popular religious movements mentioned above were seen often in cities like Edo, especially during violent protests like the *uchi kowashi* (literally meaning “house smashing”), peasant riots that were characterized by the raiding of merchant properties in the city.\(^2^3\) The theatre district of Edo would have been the centre of it all due to the dissolution of social boundaries characteristic of the “floating world.” In other words, Nanboku would have been a first-hand witness to the failures of the *bakufu* and the consequences of such failures. Due to these social surroundings, one should not be surprised if Nanboku was exposed to millenarian ideas from popular religion. As such, for him to make use of a saviour in the form of Sakura-hime to point out the weakness of the established order is highly plausible.

The points that I have made so far have illustrated the possible anxieties that were reflected by *Sakura-hime* in 1817. Now I would like to turn my attention to the *sekai* that *Sakura-hime* is crafted from. This is important as it allows us to look at the implications that *Sakura-hime* draws on. Audience members who frequented the *kabuki* theatre in 1817 would have known very well the two *sekai* that constitute *Sakura-hime*, and because of this, in order to fully understand the character of Sakura-hime, it is important to look at how Sakura-hime and her world came to be.

The *sekai* that gives *Sakura-hime* its overarching narrative is the *Sumida-gawa mono*. This *sekai* originated in the *noh* play, *Sumida-gawa*, which is a story about a mother searching for her kidnapped child, Umewaka, only to find out that Umewaka has passed away.\(^2^4\) The structure and plot of *Sumida-gawa* was not terribly complex, and if one tries to compare *Sakura-hime* directly with the *noh* play *Sumida-gawa*, one will find few similarities beside the character

\(^{23}\) For more on *uchi kowashi*, see Totman, 308.

of Umewaka (also known as Umewakamaru in Sakura-hime). This is because each adaptation of the Sumida-gawa mono added to and changed various elements of the original Sumida-gawa and before one realizes it, the original noh version of Sumida-gawa is no longer recognizable. One example of this is the inclusion of the miyakodori (or the “Capital Bird”) in Sakura-hime. The miyakodori is traditionally seen as part of the Sumida-gawa mono simply because of its appearance on the banks of the Sumida River in the Ise monogatari. This fact was spotted by kabuki playwrights and was quickly included into the Sumida-gawa mono, and before long, the miyakodori became a standard feature of this sekai.25

For my current discussion of Sakura-hime, the feature of the Sumida-gawa mono that I wish to highlight has to do with the resolutions of the plays that involve this particular sekai. Starting from the first kabuki play that used Sumida-gawa mono (written by and starring Ichikawa Danjūrō I, titled Shusse Sumida-gawa, first performed in 1701), every single kabuki play that makes use of this sekai features a chigo as the suffering victim and ends with one form of divine intervention or another.26 This is perhaps not entirely surprising given Danjūrō I’s association in popular perception with the divine27 – some have claimed that even the term “aragoto” encompassed religious shades of meaning.28 This religiosity found in Shusse Sumida-gawa, and since then associated with the resolution of every play that involves the Sumida-gawa mono, points to the fact that divine intervention is an integral part of this sekai. Furthermore, all

26 For the plot summaries of all major Sumida-gawa mono produced prior to Sakura-hime, see Moriyama, Tsuruya Namboku: naimaze no sekai, 176 – 188.
27 Hattori Yukio 服部幸雄. Edo kabuki bunkaron 江戸歌舞伎文化論. (Heibonsha, 2003), 146.
28 Hattori has argued that the “rough style” of acting called aragoto, was called such because are, the stem word of ara, means both “rough” and “wild” as well as “to appear.” The “roughness” of aragoto, he argued, was representative of the might of the divine during their acts of heroism in chastising demons and evil spirit; the divine literally “appeared” on stage as the actor. Because the explosive energy of the divine was actually believed to be released through the actors in the aragoto role, their movements are necessarily “rough” and “wild.” For a more in-depth analysis of aragoto, see Hattori, Edo kabuki bunkaron, 144.
of these divine interventions are centred on a young adolescent boy; these boys are often both the manifestation of the divine and the victim of the play. Given that this is the case, since *Sakura-hime* also uses *Sumida-gawa mono* as a central part of its plot, it is conceivable that *Sakura-hime* too ends with a divine intervention in the form of Sakura-hime.

One should also note that *Shusse Sumida-gawa* effectively replaced the *noh* play, *Sumida-gawa*, as the canonical progenitor of the *Sumida-gawa mono*. This is likely due to the fact that many of the changes made in *Shusse Sumida-gawa* became hallmarks of the *Sumida-gawa mono* that followed. One of the most important changes made by *Shusse Sumida-gawa* is the replacement of the mother-figure by a samurai who proves his loyalty by looking for the missing child. The intimate plot between mother and child is rewritten into a narrative of succession disputes and political intrigue, forming the basis of the typical *oiesōdō* (“succession dispute”) that is characteristic of all *Sumida-gawa mono*.

The second *sekai* that constitutes an integral part of *Sakura-hime* is that of the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*. While *Sumida-gawa mono* gave *Sakura-hime* the overarching plot of an *oiesōdō*, this second *sekai*, the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*, gave this play the intertwining relationship between two of its primary characters, Seigen and Sakura-hime. Since this relationship between Seigen and Sakura-hime is of primary importance to my discussion of Sakura-hime’s role within *Sakura-hime*, a review of *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* is in order.

The *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* dates to a *kojōruri* (“old puppet play”) play of the mid to late 17th century entitled *Isshin niga byakudō* (*The White Path of the One Heart Crossing Two*...  

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29 For more on the young boys of *Sumida-gawa mono*, see Moriyama, *Tsuruya Nanboku: naimaze no sekai*, 176 – 188.
30 For the establishment of the *oiesōdō* as part of *Sumida-gawa mono*, see Moriyama, *Tsuruya Nanboku: naimaze no sekai*, 175.
Rivers) by an unknown playwright.31 Without going into too many details regarding the plot of *Isshin niga byakudō*, let me briefly note some of its important features that are crystallized in *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*.32 The most obvious feature of a *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*, which one also sees in *Sakura-hime*, is the amorous, though one-sided, relationship between Seigen and Sakura-hime. It was Seigen’s obsession with Sakura-hime in *Isshin niga byakudō* that first portrayed his downfall due to his insatiable lust. *Isshin niga byakudō* also sets the standard for the destructive nature of Seigen’s lust. In fact, Seigen’s obsessions are so deep that they, on more than one occasion, manifest themselves physically in *Isshin niga byakudō* as creatures that haunt and harm Sakura-hime throughout the play, both before and after the death of Seigen. This supernatural manifestation of Seigen’s obsession beyond the boundaries of life and death is a staple feature of the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*, and can be seen in *Sakura-hime* as well.33

Some scholars have argued that this obsession of Seigen in *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* is in fact a parody of literary tropes, and is one of the reasons why *Sakura-hime* should be treated as a parody as a whole.34 The literary work that is most often cited as the target of parody by the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* is that of the *Dōjōji engi emaki*, and the many variations of this same *Dōjōji* story. Similarities between the stories of *Dōjōji* and the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* are most apparent at the end of *Isshin niga byakudō*, as Seigen pursues Sakura-hime through the beast realm in the body of a serpent after both of them have died. Kawai Masumi has pointed out

31 Moriyama, *Tsuruya Nanboku: naimaze no sekai*, 188.
that this is actually mirroring the story of the *Dōjōji engi emaki*, where the young priest is pursued by a beautiful young woman who is transformed into a serpent. The parody pivots on the fact that the object of desire and the pursuer of that object are reversed in the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*. This argument is even more convincing when we consider that the *kane* of Tsurigane Gonsuke, the principle villain of *Sakura-hime*, means “bell.” This, along with Gonsuke’s role in causing the downfall of both Seigen and Sakura-hime, serves to support the idea that *Sakura-hime* can be read as a parody of *Dōjōji engi emaki*. I would argue that although the role played by the monk, Seigen, and the woman, Sakura-hime, are reversed in a *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*, the fundamental dynamic between these two characters remains the same.

What the arguments for the parodic reading of the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono*, and by extension, *Sakura-hime*, often focus on is the gender and social roles played by the monk and the young lady in *Dōjōji engi emaki*. However, if one simplifies the details of *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* and boils them down to the most fundamental level, one can see that despite the reversal of gender roles, the dynamics between the monk and the woman – and Seigen and Sakura-hime – remain largely unchanged: in both cases, the object of desire is the same, which is the salvific ability represented by the handsome monk in *Dōjōji engi emaki* and Sakura-hime in *Sakura-hime*. This divinity of Sakura-hime is both an important feature of the *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* and part of the reason why I think one should read Sakura-hime, as she appears in *Sakura-hime*, as the manifestation of Kannon.

In *Isshin niga byakudō*, Sakura-hime and the divine are inseparable. In this play Sakura-hime is said to be the realization of her parents’ prayers to the Kannon of Kiyomizu Temple. Kannon is also responsible for her meeting with Seigen, as it was during her trip to pay homage

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35 Kawai, 441.
to Kannon at Kiyomizu prior to her marriage that Seigen first catches a glimpse of Sakura-hime. During Sakura-hime’s childbirth, it is only with the assistance of Kannon that she successfully gives birth to a son (though she dies during childbirth). Finally, when being chased by the serpentine Seigen in the beast realm, it is Kannon who guides Sakura-hime across the bridge into the Pure Land, and provides her with the means to slay Seigen.\textsuperscript{36} The connection between Kannon and Sakura-hime is a crucial feature of the \textit{Seigen Sakura-hime mono}, and when taken into consideration, I would argue that Seigen, in \textit{Isshin niga byakudō}, is pursuing the representation of divinity as represented by Sakura-hime.

Through this quick look at the \textit{sekai} that constitute the narrative of \textit{Sakura-hime}, I have listed some of the things that Nanboku inherited from his predecessors in the writing of his play. From the \textit{Sumida-gawa mono}, Nanboku inherited the character of Umewakamaru, as well as the overarching \textit{oiesōdō} narrative of the Yoshida house. The \textit{Seigen Sakura-hime mono}, on the other hand, gave Nanboku the characters of Seigen and Sakura-hime, and the complex relationship between them. For the purposes of my argument – that Sakura-hime in \textit{Sakura-hime} should be read as a divine saviour – I wish to highlight the religiosity of both the \textit{Sumida-gawa mono} and the \textit{Seigen Sakura-hime mono}; the former ensures that a play will end with the intervention of the divine, while the latter suggests the divine nature of the character of Sakura-hime ever since her conception within the world of theatre.

\textsuperscript{36} Moriyama, \textit{Tsuruya Nanboku: naimaze no sekai}, 188 – 191.
Chapter 4: Divinity Manifested

The Chigo as Divine

All the evidence that I have pointed to up until now illustrates the context within which Sakura-hime was written. The contextual evidence is useful in constructing a framework for interpretation, but by itself is not substantial in showing the role of Sakura-hime as the divine saviour of Sakura-hime. I will now turn my attention more specifically to the play in hopes of showing how Sakura-hime fits within the contextual framework that I have constructed in the previous sections of this paper. To start, I would like to look at the prologue of Sakura-hime, as I believe it is through the addition of this prologue that Nanboku reinforces the divinity of Sakura-hime.

The prologue of Sakura-hime depicts the relationship between Seigen and his chigo, Shiragiku. The scene is set in E-no-shima of Kamakura. Knowing that the priests of the temple are making light of his relationship with Shiragiku, Seigen has decided that the best course of action is to commit shinjū ("double suicide") with his love. However, after Shiragiku leaps to his death, Seigen sees how high the cliff is, hesitates, and decides to live on; older versions of Sakura-hime show Seigen falling on a pine tree on the face of the cliff as the reason for his survival.37 What is important is that the result is the same in both instances: Seigen fails to uphold his promise to Shiragiku and lives on to become the chief abbot of the New Kiyomizu temple. As for Shiragiku, he reincarnates and becomes Sakura-hime.

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37 For the sequence of events that occurred during the prologue, see Brandon, 245 – 248. For the difference found in earlier version of Sakura-hime, see Samuel L. Leiter, “Sakura-hime (azuma bunshō),” in New Kabuki Encyclopedia: A Revised Adaptation of Kabuki Jiten (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 543 - 545.
To understand the divinity that Nanboku inscribes into Sakura-hime through this relationship between Seigen and Shiragiku, I must first explain the implications of their nanshoku within the proper historical context. While Sakura-hime is clearly commenting on the Edo period, when looking at the nanshoku relationship, it is important to place it into the historical context of the play’s setting, that of the Kamakura period. A question one might want to ask is what would the audience think about nanshoku in the Kamakura context as opposed to the more familiar context of 1817? Nanboku made sure that the audience would recall the connotations of nanshoku from the Kamakura period by only showing nanshoku between a monk and his chigo and by basing this prologue on an actual historical event that happened during the Kamakura period.

Nanshoku, in the context of 1817, was a common practice among adult males. Any adult male of any class, so long as he had the means, could easily participate in nanshoku with an adolescent boy; the popularity of nanshoku can be seen in the government’s efforts to define the legal parameters of nanshoku.38 Often this took the form of male prostitution which was intimately linked to the kabuki theatre.39 This was not always the case historically. During the Kamakura period, the practitioners of nanshoku were more or less limited to monks and samurai, and their partners were also limited to acolytes and pageboys. The places of practice, too, were mostly confined to monasteries and samurai households; even though monks and samurai continued to practice nanshoku throughout the Edo period, the place of practice shifted to that of the licensed quarters.40 This is in stark contrast to the way Edo nanshoku was practiced. The nanshoku relationship between Seigen and Shiragiku is clearly one that is between a monk and

40 Ibid, 75.
his *chigo*. Furthermore, it is suggested that their relationship was consummated in a monastery; after all, the reason they decided to commit suicide was due to other monks making light of their relationship.\(^{41}\) The relationship between Seigen and Shiragiku harkens to a time before the Edo period and the audience would no doubt have noticed this; some of the men in the audience would have likely been practitioners of *nanshoku* themselves. As for those who had not experienced *nanshoku* themselves, they would have known about *nanshoku* through popular literature, where it was a common literary theme that garnered immense interest among consumers.\(^{42}\) This representation of *nanshoku* within *Sakura-hime* is paired with the fact that the *shinjū* of the prologue is based on a real event that supposedly had taken place during the Kamakura period. Despite some differences in details, a real *shinjū* is said to have taken place in E-no-shima by a *chigo* named Shiragiku, which led to the founding of a place called Chigo-ga-fuchi ("Rock of the Temple Page").\(^{43}\) Nanboku forces his viewers to recall specific ideas from the past by showing them a real historical.

Let me now turn my attention to the *chigo*, both as an object of desire and as a representation of the divine, within the context of Buddhism in the medieval period. The *chigo* is the adolescent acolyte of a senior monk, and often the love partner of the senior monk. Said to be introduced by Kūkai, the practice of *nanshoku* was associated with the Buddhist institution since its conception.\(^{44}\) Works that claim the legitimacy of these Kūkai legends often claim that *nanshoku* was sanctioned by the Buddha to satisfy the desire of monks who were forbidden

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\(^{41}\) Brandon, 246.  
\(^{42}\) Pflugfelder, 18 – 19.  
female companionship. Historically, there is little merit in legends surrounding the introduction of nanshoku by Kūkai. However, in these were popular legends, and as far as the people of the Edo period were concerned, Kūkai was the one responsible for bringing nanshoku to Japan. This association between Kūkai and nanshoku was so deeply entrenched that Kūkai was also called the Chigo Daishi. Nanshoku’s association with Buddhism during the Kamakura period is something that must be taken into consideration, especially for the purposes of my current argument.

If one looks at the artistic depictions of chigo, one will find that the association between nanshoku and Buddhism stretches beyond the legendary origins of nanshoku I have just noted. The chigo has often been portrayed as the manifestation of the divine in many Buddhist paintings. A famous portrait of Kūkai titled Chigo Daishi from the 14th century, now preserved at the Art Institute of Chicago, shows him as a chigo on a floating lotus. This is not the only example of Kūkai being portrayed as a chigo; many other paintings of the Chigo Daishi were produced, and “[t]he earliest surviving versions… date to the mid-thirteenth century.” Given Kūkai’s status as the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan, this painting shows the significance of the chigo image as a religious symbol.

Nor was Kūkai the only divine or important Buddhist figure that was depicted as a chigo. There are quite a few Japanese depictions of Siddhartha, the historical Buddha, that use the image of a boy; while the iconography concerning Siddhartha is more or less standardized over

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45 Three of the most well-known legends that attribute to Kūkai the popularization of nanshoku can be found in Kōbō daishi ikkan no sho (1598), Iwatsutsujii (1667), and Nanshoku ōkagami (1687). For a summary of each of these, see Schalow, “Kūkai and the Tradition of Male Love in Japanese Buddhism,” 216 – 228. For the argument that claims the practice of nanshoku as the Buddha’s compensation for monks forbidden from female companionship, see Paul Gordon Schalow, trans. Wild Azaleas, by Kitamura Kigin, in Partings at Dawn: an Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature, ed. Stephen D. Miller. (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1996), 103.

46 Guth, 2.


48 Ibid, 4.
time in many places around the world, the use of the image of the chigo is most frequent within
Japan. Another important religious figure within Japan that is often portrayed as a chigo is
Shōtoku Taishi, one of the 7th century progenitors of the Japanese court system and the reputed
composer of the famous Seventeen Article Constitution. Bodhisattvas also received such
artistic treatment. There are quite a few paintings of Manjushiri and Kannon that employ the
iconography of the chigo. The association of Kannon with the image of the chigo is particularly
important for me because it shows yet another connection between Sakura-hime, as the
reincarnation of Shiragiku, and Kannon in addition to the one that I have previously mentioned.
Furthermore, we should also keep in mind that comparisons made between the beauty of young
boys and figures of the divine are fairly commonplace during the Edo period, suggesting that the
association between the two was culturally well established. This is especially true within the
context of the kabuki theatre, where the grace and beauty of the young boys tasked with playing
female characters during the early stages of kabuki are often compared to that of divine Buddhist
figures – the appearance of these boys is metaphorically described as the coming of the three
Buddhist deities (Amida, Kannon, and Seishi), inviting the dead into the Pure Land. Certain
“vernacular prose texts had recorded audience members shouting out ‘It’s Kannon!’ or ‘It’s
Jizō!’ as the onnagata made his appearance on stage.” It was, in fact, common in the Edo area

49 Ibid, 7.
50 Ibid, 10.
51 Ibid, 13 – 19.
53 Paul Gordon Schalow, “Figures of Worship: Responses to Onnagata on the Kabuki Stage in Seventeenth-century
for actors to disguise themselves as the spiritual image of godly figures and to perform “miracles” – a creative way to increase their own popularity perhaps.\(^\text{54}\)

Literary depictions of the *chigo* also associate them with the divine. I have already mentioned that literary works documenting the legendary origins of *nanshoku* always connect it with the religious leader Kūkai, but these works are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the literary depictions of the *chigo*. To see how *Sakura-hime* is using the image of the *chigo* through Sakura-hime, perhaps it would be helpful to look at the literary trends that developed over the years in the depiction of the *chigo*.

While *chigo* appear quite frequently within literature, one particular genre of stories comes to mind when thinking about the *chigo* and the divine. This is the genre of the *chigo monogatari*, particularly ones that deal with the idea of revelation; though most of these works were produced during the Muromachi period, they were still widely circulated and read during the Edo period.\(^\text{55}\) Some general trends within the *chigo monogatari* are worth noting and are summarized as follows:

In most (but not all) of the stories, a monk falls in love with a *chigo*, and typically the results are disastrous. Tales in which a monk falls in love with a woman tend to take on a comic tone, but when the beloved is a *chigo*, the tale often ends tragically. The *chigo* may be kidnapped…, falsely accused…, or attacked… Others may attempt to kill him…, or he may actually be slain… Perhaps the *chigo* dies of lovesickness…, but he is just as likely to drown himself… or to trick others into murdering him… After death, it may be claimed...

\(^{54}\) Hattori, *Edo kabuki bunkaron*, 139.

that the *chigo* was the avatar of a god or bodhisattva.  

These literary trends provide a useful perspective for analyzing *Sakura-hime*. Although there is nothing that directly associates the genre of *chigo monogatari* with *Sakura-hime*, that there are previous literary trends that have set the *chigo* as an image of the divine adds to the plausibility of the argument I am making here regarding the divine nature of *Sakura-hime*.

This association of the *chigo* with the divine and social critique stretches beyond literature. Certain Buddhist sects believed that, in *mappō*, the latter days of the Buddhist law, all *chigo* are manifestations of Kannon without exceptions, so long as they have undergone specific rituals of initiation that literally transformed *chigo* into Kannon.  

According Bernard Faure, a child is made into a *chigo* through a process called the *chigo kanjō* (literally, “*chigo* ordination”), “the purpose of this… ritual is to introduce the *chigo* into the compassionate realm of Kannon and to achieve his identification with this bodhisattva, through his becoming an ‘ideal’ *chigo*.”

Because of this, “[a]vatars of Kannon… were created ritually,” and “the identity between the *chigo* and Kannon or other bodhisattvas and *kamis* had become part of the medieval Japanese imaginary.” This same connection between the *chigo* and the divine is made explicit during festivals “as he receives the feast of offerings which parishioners have prepared for the deity’s consumption.”

I should also note that these rituals of initiation for the *chigo* are made to imitate accession rituals of the Emperor:

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
With the dissolution of the Ritsuryō system and the ascendency of the Fujiwara regents, the emperor had lost his political power but had gained instead symbolic prestige, through the image of the ‘child-emperor’… There is therefore a symbolic equivalence between the chigo of the Buddhist temples (as avatars of the kamis or of bodhisattvas like Kannon) and the emperor. This equivalence would be played out in the chigo abhiseka (chigo kanjō)… as a Buddhist replica of the imperial accession rite.62

That the chigo, as part of the chigo kanjō, “ascends the high seat, and is treated as an emperor”63 further supports this parallel between the chigo and the emperor. As Faure has stated, the chigo is seen as “a double of the adolescent Shōtoku Taishi, who was both the ideal ruler and a manifestation of Kannon. The figure of Shōtoku Taishi sums up the two aspects, the compassionate bodhisattva and the compassionate ruler.”64 The nanshoku relationship between the older monk and his chigo thus carries with it religious and political significance. By having sex and protecting the young man, the older monk believes himself to be doing a service to the divine, who will grant him divine protection and eventual salvation as a form of reward.65 At the same time, the older monk is also symbolically usurping imperial power and prestige by having sex with a symbolic representation of the Emperor; “the chigo whom the priest rapes is at the same time a potential saviour, and the priest rapes him while worshiping him as an avatar and a double of the emperor. Surely, this heightened sense of transgression must have increased the pleasure.”66 In this manner, the initiation rituals for the chigo imbued them with both divine and imperial power.

63 Ibid, 261.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid, 258.
66 Ibid, 261.
I have thus shown the religious and political significance of the *chigo* in its visual, literary, and historical representation. Applying these representational trends of the *chigo* on to the prologue of *Sakura-hime*, one can begin to see how Sakura-hime can be seen as a divine figure. Now let me turn my attention back to the prologue of *Sakura-hime*.

The play makes it abundantly clear that Shiragiku is a manifestation of Kannon. Seigen, when introducing himself during the prologue, states explicitly that he is a monk of Hasedera Temple in Kamakura. That Hasedera is the temple that Nanboku has chosen as the temple that Seigen served is not coincidental, and the association here between Shiragiku and Kannon, as well as Seigen’s duty towards Kannon, are deliberately emphasized. The rituals that Shiragiku experienced when entering the temple as a *chigo* would have transformed him into a manifestation of Kannon; the use of Shiragiku as the manifestation of Kannon would not have been unfamiliar to the audience of 1817, who had “a desire to see the divine in the child” as a result of their being used to seeing such imagery in established genres of literature.

Shiragiku’s tragic fate should also be seen as conventional from a literary point of view for it follows the patterns established by the *chigo monogatari*. Like the *chigo* in the *chigo monogatari*, Shiragiku is the victim here. Shiragiku is also the source of conflict or disturbance for it is Shiragiku who is explicitly stated to be “[t]ightly held by ties of love” – though according to the established tradition of *nanshoku*, Seigen is mostly like the one that initiated...

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67 Brandon, 247.
70 Brandon, 246.
their relationship; this is also comparable to the situations illustrated in the *chigo monogatari* where the *chigo* is always the source of conflict.

An additional indication of Shiragiku’s divinity can be gleaned from the fact *Sakura-hime* is a *Sumida-gawa mono*. As I have previously noted, the rules of *Sumida-gawa mono* dictates that the suffering, preadolescent boy be a manifestation of the divine, and through his divinity the conflict of the plot is resolved. Theatregoers of the Edo period would have expected this from a *Sumida-gawa mono*, and as such, they would have associated Shiragiku with the earthly manifestation of the divine.

If the case of Shiragiku is truly comparable to the *chigo* of the *chigo monogatari*, and he is in fact a manifestation of Kannon, then why does he not take his true form after his death? Although Shiragiku falls into the *chigo* archetype of previous literary genres, Seigen is not the average monk depicted in literature. Unlike other monks from *chigo monogatari*, Seigen does not commit to his promise of death. That Seigen is fully consumed by hesitation and fear arguably results in Shiragiku’s re-manifestation not as a bodhisattva but as a ghastly green ball of fire. The failure to act by Seigen shows that he is motivated purely by lust and he is neither in love nor fully devoted to Shiragiku. In other words, unlike the monks typical of *chigo monogatari* who, through the death of their beloved *chigo*, understand the transience of life and the folly of their past actions, thus reaching a state of religious awakening, Seigen has learned nothing from his relationship with Shiragiku. Seigen ultimately places more importance on his own life than on his promise and devotion to Kannon in the form of Shiragiku.\(^7\) This is the reason why Shiragiku does not manifest himself to Seigen in his true form. This lack of devotion

\(^7\) For the religious awakening associated with the death of the *chigo* in *chigo monogatari*, see Childs, “*Chigo Monogatari*: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons?” 127 – 131.
to Kannon also justifies Seigen’s subsequent suffering throughout the play; Seigen’s fall from grace, his death, and his lack of salvation can all be seen as a form of karmic retribution.\textsuperscript{72}

\textit{The Princess as Chigo}

The identity of Sakura-hime and her divinity is established by the prologue in the manner summarized above. Because she is the reincarnation of Shiragiku, it is perfectly acceptable to see Sakura-hime as Shiragiku throughout the play. And while it is true that the prologue is extremely short and over very quickly, the audience, too, is encouraged to think of these two characters as one and the same, as Nanboku constantly reminds them of this fact. Visually, when \textit{Sakura-hime} was first staged in 1817, the role of Sakura-hime was played by the \textit{onnagata} Iwai Hanshirō V, while the role of Shiragiku was played by Iwai Matsu-no-suke, the son of Hanshirō V.\textsuperscript{73} I believe that Nanboku deliberately cast Iwai Matsu-no-suke as Shiragiku in order to establish some sort of visual continuity for the audience between Shiragiku and Sakura-hime. If we allow for a reasonable similarity between Matsu-no-suke and Hanshirō V in physical stature and appearance, we can easily see that by casting these two actors in their respective roles, Nanboku links the characters of Shiragiku and Sakura-hime; Shiragiku will become Sakura-hime, much like Matsu-no-suke will one day take over the name of Hanshirō from his father. Even if the son did not look anything like his father at all, the acting style and skillset must have been quite similar between Matsu-no-suke and Hanshirō V. The characters of Shiragiku and Sakura-hime are thus visually overlapped, constantly reminding the audience of the inseparable bond between the two, a bond as strong as one between father and son.

\textsuperscript{72} For more on the idea of Seigen’s punishment as a form of karmic retribution, see Furuido, 71.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 72.
Other reminders of the link between Shiragiku and Sakura-hime appear throughout the play. Simple plot devices, such as the lacquer incense case with “Kiyoharu” inscribed on it falling out of Sakura-hime’s cursed left-hand (the point here being that “Kiyoharu” is an alternative reading for the characters “Seigen”), and Seigen’s repeated laments and expositions about Sakura-hime’s previous life (much to the confusion of Sakura-hime), are there to remind the audience of this important connection between Shiragiku and Sakura-hime. Nanboku also made use of more complex and subtler methods in connecting Shiragiku and Sakura-hime. For this I wish to briefly turn to Act 2, the Inase River Scene of *Sakura-hime*.

Act 2, the Inase River Scene, tells of the punishment of Sakura-hime and Seigen, after the latter willingly took the blame for his brother, Tsurigane Gonsuke, for defiling the temple by engaging in sexual activity on temple grounds – the primary problem being that Sakura-hime is no longer a *chigo*. According to Gengo, a retainer of another villain of the play, Akugorō, their action is punishable by death, yet, by the mercy of his lord (or in the case of Sakura-hime, by her imperial blood), Sakura-hime is stripped of her rank and reduced to the status of an outcaste, while Seigen is subjected to one hundred lashes in addition to being reduced to an outcaste.\(^\text{74}\)

From a narrative standpoint, it makes sense to not have two of the most important characters in *Sakura-hime* die in the second act, but a closer look at their punishment reveals some deeper significance. Though sometimes used for other crimes, the reduction to outcaste status, “known as *hinin teka* (literally, ‘under the hand of the hinin’) is best remembered in Japan today as the penalty for lovers who failed in their attempts to commit double suicide”\(^\text{75}\) during the Edo period. Because Seigen suffered this punishment as opposed to death, it is reasonable to assume that he

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\(^{74}\) Brandon, 278.

is in fact being punished for his failed shinjū with Shiragiku, and not for the lewd activities that he supposedly committed in the temple, which would be in accordance with the idea of karmic retribution.

The emphasis on Sakura-hime’s imperial blood here is another reminder that Seigen is not being punished for the defilement of the temple grounds. By claiming to have had sex with Sakura-hime, Seigen is in usurping her imperial prestige. This is a situation that is similar to a nanshoku relationship given the status of the chigo as I have outlined previously – the initiation of the chigo paralleling the ascension ritual of the child emperor. Although Seigen is not the culprit here, he is not free of blame. Even though it was Gonsuke that usurped political power by stealing the heirloom of the Yoshida house and by raping Sakura-hime, Seigen’s relationship with Shiragiku in the past means that he is guilty of a similar crime. I will also note that the lust of both these men results in the birth of a new life. In the case of Gonsuke, it is the illegitimate son that Sakura-hime gives birth to as a result of their previous encounter, while in the case of Seigen, it is the birth of Sakura-hime that resulted from his relationship with Shiragiku, which led to the death of Shiragiku and his subsequent rebirth. In this way, if one accepts the premise that Shiragiku is a manifestation of Kannon, Sakura-hime is, in fact, following the traditions of the Seigen Sakura-hime mono because, like Isshin niga byakudō which established the sekai of Seigen Sakura-hime mono, Sakura-hime’s life is a gift of Kannon and represents Kannon’s presence in the human realm.

The above analysis of the Inase River scene showcases Nanboku’s effort to remind his audience of the connection between Shiragiku and Sakura-hime, and Seigen’s failure to commit to his promise to Shiragiku/Kannon. With subtle hints such as these, the identity of Sakura-hime as established in the prologue is kept alive throughout the play until the very last scene. Seigen’s
constant reminiscing of Shiragiku throughout the play and his recounting of Shiragiku’s fate at
the moment of his own death is also there to emphasize Sakura-hime’s identity as Kannon for
she is the reincarnation of Shiragiku. I would like to turn my attention to the ending of Sakura-
hime, in order to extend my argument that Sakura-hime is indeed Kannon as the divine saviour.

The Princess as Divine

Before jumping into the final scene of Sakura-hime, I wish to first look at the second
scene of Act 4, the penultimate scene of the play. The most significant events that take place in
this act are Gonsuke selling Sakura-hime into prostitution, resulting in a part-princess part-
courtesan hybrid, and Sakura-hime exacting revenge for her father and brother by killing
Gonsuke and their son, and taking back the miyakodori scroll. This scene is important because it
shows Sakura-hime’s transformation as a character. Initially, as I have tried to show thus far, she
is a representation of the divine because she is the reincarnation of Shiragiku, who as a chigo was
made into the divine through Buddhist initiation rituals, but after being sold into prostitution,
Sakura-hime comes into her own as a manifestation of the divine.

In a way, as the reincarnation of Shiragiku, the divinity that Sakura-hime inherited from
her previous life is dormant until this scene. Sakura-hime lived her life without knowledge or
acceptance of her identity in her previous life. Even when Seigen tells her the truth with his
dying breath, Sakura-hime reacts in shock and denial.76 It is only after she has returned home
from the brothel in Act 4 that we get her first affirmative response to the fact that she is
Shiragiku. She refers to her identity as Shiragiku in a matter-of-fact manner, suggesting that she

76 Brandon, 327.
has accepted and internalized this fact. While the passage of time certainly would have aided her in accepting her identity as Shiragiku, I think it is the fact that she has become a courtesan that completes her transformation and allows her to accept her inherited identity, turning her dormant divinity into an active one.

That Sakura-hime has been sold into prostitution is significant for the interpretation of *Sakura-hime*. Many scholars have pointed out the parodic effect generated through Sakura-hime’s dialogue as she constantly switches back and forth between the more refined way of speaking befitting her status as princess and a cruder form of speech prominent within the licensed quarters. No doubt it would have been very entertaining for the audience to see Sakura-hime physically embodying the two extremes of society. Seen from another point of view, however, there is great religious significance in her becoming a courtesan.

The link between the licensed quarters and the courtesans on the one hand, and Buddhism and bodhisattvas on the other hand is worth exploring here. The very name given to the licensed quarters, the *ukiyo* (“floating world”) is a pun on the Buddhist idea of the *ukiyo* (“sad world”). These two usages of the word “ukiyo” are actually not as disconnected as it might seem at first glance. In a way, the pleasure that people seek within the licensed quarters are exactly the kind of things firm believers of Buddhism stay away from because such pleasures are transient in nature; perhaps the only real difference between these two usages of *ukiyo* is in perspective, one celebrates its transience while the other warns against it. When we consider this dual meaning of

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77 Ibid, 344.
78 Arguments that are centred on this scene tend to suggest that the embodiment of both high and low classes within Sakura-hime generates humour, which signifies an inversion of established order and undermines the supposed power or horror of the supernatural represented here by the ghost of Seigen. See Suwa Haruo 諏訪春雄, *Tsuruya Nanboku: kokkie o konomite hito o warawasu koto o waza to su* 鶴屋南北：滑稽を好みて、人を笑わすことを業とする. (Kyoto: Mineruva Shobō, 2005), 79 – 80.
ukiyo, Sakura-hime’s changes in attitude and perspective after returning from the licensed quarters can be seen in a more religious light.

Another point worth considering is the status of the courtesan. Long before the Edo period, there developed a strong connection between the courtesan and bodhisattvas like Kannon. Throughout the Edo period, Buddhist nuns, bikuni, were slowly reduced to a type of wandering women; certain groups of bikuni even began performing the same functions as courtesans. This conflation of the agents of pleasure with the agents of enlightenment also occurred in literature. The courtesan of Eguchi, an earthly manifestation of the bodhisattva Fugen, is well known, appearing in hagiographical accounts of monks like Saigyō and Shōkū and in noh theatre. The Dōjōji engi emaki, the original story that Sakura-hime is said to be a parody of, was also re-interpreted, rendering the young lady and the monk both as manifestations of Kannon.

Taking all of these things into consideration, Sakura-hime’s return from the licensed quarters can be seen as having religious significance. Similar to how Shiragiku became a manifestation of Kannon by going through the proper initiation rituals and becoming a chigo, Sakura-hime realizes the divinity she has inherited from her previous life by going to the licensed quarters and becoming a courtesan. This realization of her own divine potential is signified by her embodiment of extremes; after her return, the combination of princess and courtesan, as well as the mortal and supernatural are both laid bare in front of the audience. The first dichotomy of princess and courtesan can easily be identified by the audience through Sakura-hime’s new way of speaking, something that Gonsuke explicitly points out, further

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emphasizing this oddity. The second dichotomy of the mortal and supernatural are seen through Seigen’s ghost, who has had all his evil transferred to Gonsuke upon his death and has since been occupying Sakura-hime’s body. Seigen’s spirit presents an interesting case, for it is his spirit that ensures Sakura-hime “purity” within the *ukiyo*, allowing Sakura-hime to become part of the *ukiyo* without being trapped by it, likening her to a bodhisattva in the human realm. Furthermore, it is only after Sakura-hime has returned from the licensed quarters, having fully embodied the divine, that she is able to rectify the succession dispute of her family with minimum effort. Gonsuke, for no apparent reason aside from being drunk, decides to show Sakura-hime the *miyakodori* scroll and to tell her that he killed her father and brother. It is as if Kannon, once fully manifested within Sakura-hime, can automatically rectify the chaotic situation without the need for human assistance; all Sakura-hime has to do is to plunge a sword into Gonsuke and his son and her family will be restored, rendering all the efforts of her brother, Matsuwaka, and his retainers moot.

Gonsuke’s death also washes away the crimes of Seigen. After being killed by Sakura-hime, Seigen’s spirit resides within Sakura-hime’s body, essentially protecting her from her clients in the licensed quarters, allowing her to break free from the *ukiyo* while still being a product of it. Seigen’s body, however, continues to live through Gonsuke. The scars on Seigen’s face are transferred on to Gonsuke’s face after Seigen has died, and since Danjūrō VII played both the roles of Seigen and Gonsuke, these two characters are now physically the same person in the eyes of the audience. All the actions taken by Seigen’s spirit are, generally speaking,

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82 Brandon, 340.
83 Ibid, 346.
84 This overlapping of Seigen and Gonsuke is further emphasized by the fact that these two characters are brothers within the play – a fact that Seigen made explicit during the prologue. See Matsuda Osamu 松田修. “Tsuruya Nanboku Sakura-hime azuma bunshō no <Sakura-hime> - karuma wo shiranu karuma no onna” 鶴屋南北桜姫東文
positive – he keeps clients away from Sakura-hime, which allows her to escape the ukiyo, and he also attempts to point Sakura-hime in the right direction concerning the true identity of Gonsuke, which allows her to transcend her fate as a prostitute and overcome the greed of Gonsuke and her manager. This suggests that all the crimes he has committed in life due to physical desires are transferred over to Gonsuke, while his spirit, though denied salvation, remains pure (which would make sense when Seigen has no physical body to go after physical desires anymore).\textsuperscript{85} Although Sakura-hime kills Seigen, because she does not fully realize her divine potential, she cannot wipe away the crimes committed by Seigen, and it is only after she returns from the licensed quarters that she is able, with minimum effort, to grant Seigen absolution by killing Gonsuke, the embodiment of evil within the context of 

\textit{Sakura-hime}.

Let me now turn my attention to the finale of \textit{Sakura-hime}. In this scene, constables are in pursuit of Sakura-hime, who is guilty of killing Gonsuke and their son. Hanbei, a Yoshida retainer, disguised as Sakura-hime while carrying her in a hamper he has on his back, fights to get away so that he can bring the \textit{miyakodori} scroll back to his lord and restore the Yoshida clan.\textsuperscript{86} This scene takes place during the Three Shrines Festival at the gate of the Asakusa Kannon Shrine in Edo. Although Hanbei initially wears the clothes of Sakura-hime, he throws his disguise to the ground, hoping to scare away the constables. From the narrative’s perspective, the entire sequence makes no logical sense. If Hanbei is trying to smuggle Sakura-hime back home, and no one knows she is being carried in a hamper on his back, it makes no sense for him to dress up as Sakura-hime to catch the attention of the constables. On the other hand, if he is

\textsuperscript{85} For the positive impact of Seigen’s ghost on Sakura-hime’s fate, see Moriyama, “Seisei no sōshitsu – Sakura-hime to Seigen,” 19.

\textsuperscript{86} Brandon, 348 – 349.
disguised as Sakura-hime in order to draw the attention of the constables, carrying Sakura-hime around on his back is counter-intuitive for if he is caught, they will probably take a quick look in his hamper and discover Sakura-hime as well. This sequence of events only makes sense if one looks at it from a different perspective, one that emphasizes the images that are being presented.

The audience in 1817 would have seen the following. First, they would have seen Sakura-hime running around on stage, evading the constables. The audience can tell that something is definitely different with this Sakura-hime, but she is, for all intents and purposes, Sakura-hime. They see the constables grab Sakura-hime. The actors then strike a pose (mie), during which the curtain is removed from behind them to reveal the gate of the Asakusa Kannon Shrine, immediately recognizable by the audience. Following this, Sakura-hime throws the constables off her. As a response, the constables announce their mission to capture her, emphasizing the fact that it is the Asakusa Kannon Three Shrines Festival. Once they finish their lines, Sakura-hime’s dress is tossed aside, revealing to the audience that it is in fact Hanbei that is being chased in this scene.  

The entire sequence of events is there to emphasize the visual absence of Sakura-hime and the metaphorical presence of Kannon. Although Hanbei claims that Sakura-hime is in his hamper, the audience does not see her. What the audience sees, instead, is an image of Sakura-hime literally vanishing into thin air (through Hanbei’s act of throwing off his disguise). Juxtaposed against this physical disappearance of Sakura-hime is the constant reminder of and emphasis on the metaphorical presence of Kannon. By revealing the Asakusa Kannon Shrine when Hanbei, dressed as Sakura-hime, is in the center of the stage, and by having the constables emphasize the Asakusa Kannon Three Shrines Festival right before Sakura-hime vanishes from

87 Ibid.
sight, Nanboku is making a direct connection between Sakura-hime and Kannon. Sakura-hime can no longer be seen for she is no longer. All the audience is left with, in her place, is a shrine dedicated to the worship of Kannon on the day celebrating the founding of the associate temple of Asakusa Kannon Shrine, Sensōji.88

What is even more interesting is that, according to legends, the founding of Sensōji was centred on the enshrinement of one particular statue of Kannon caught within the fishing nets of three brothers on the banks of Sumida River. As more and more people heard of this miraculous catch, worshippers came from various places to pray to this particular statue. What started as a makeshift shrine became larger and larger until it became Sensōji.89 As for the statue of Kannon that was caught by the three brothers, it became a hibutsu ("secret buddha") not long after its original enshrinement, hidden from the sight of the public, yet ever present within the hearts of its worshippers.90 The parallelism between this hidden image of Kannon and the hidden image of Sakura-hime cannot be coincidental; by having Sakura-hime hidden on the very day of the celebration of the founding of a temple based on a hibutsu image of Kannon, Nanboku is drawing a direct connection between Sakura-hime and Kannon.

If we look at both the prologue and the finale of the play, we find that the entire play is bracketed by two religious sites that are associated with the worship of Kannon. In the prologue, Hasedera, the temple that both Seigen and Shiragiku belonged to and the place where their relationship began, is the primary focus. In the finale, the Asakusa Kannon Shrine is the primary focus. Similarly, both physical manifestations of Kannon disappear from the prologue and the

finale; Shiragiku leaps to his death, vanishing from the audience’s view in the prologue, while Sakura-hime disappears from sight and is hidden in a hamper. I do think that these are some clear indications of the religious message that underpins Sakura-hime, and that Sakura-hime should be read as a manifestation of Kannon, the divine saviour and rectifier of order.
Chapter 5: Social Critique: the Yoshida House and the Representation of the Grotesque

The last thing I want to address is the element of social critique. Kabuki scholar Hattori Yukio has stated that all the new literary cultures of early modern cities are built upon the feelings of helplessness generated by the constraints of society.\(^{91}\) In this sense, Nanboku’s works are no different. One commonality that flows beneath all the horror plays of Nanboku is the frustration with the contradictions of the real world.\(^ {92}\) The centrepiece of Nanboku’s critique has always been the sekai that he chooses to build his play around – one function of the sekai was to disguise political statements and critiques as plot elements.\(^ {93}\) By mixing different sekai together, Nanboku was able to trace out on stage the absurd social divisions of reality in a complex manner.\(^ {94}\) That Sakura-hime, too, presents a social critique is thus completely plausible.

So far, I have shown the divinity of Sakura-hime through her association with Shiragiku, her role as courtesan and her life in the ukiyo, her transcendence of binary extremes, and her disappearance from the finale. As a saviour, she is the one that rectifies order in Sakura-hime by restoring the Yoshida clan and killing Gonsuke, who basically embodies all the evil acts within the play. The impotence of the established authorities portrayed within Sakura-hime is perhaps the most obvious critique of society in general. The retainers of the Yoshida house are utterly useless in rectifying the situation; the usurpers Akugorō and Zangetsu are both at the mercy of Gonsuke whom they have hired in one situation or another. Seigen is completely motivated by his emotions and fails to see what is happening around him. In other words, those in positions of power are all utterly helpless in the face of calamity, while a lowlife like Gonsuke rises through society, from murderer to gravedigger to landlord. This is the definition of chaos, and it is only

\(^ {91}\) Hattori, *Hengeron: kabuki no seishin shi*, 122.

\(^ {92}\) Nakayama, 47.

\(^ {93}\) Suwa, 82 – 83.

\(^ {94}\) Nakayama, 123.
through divine intervention, by the hands of Sakura-hime, that order is restored. If we look back to the late 18th and early 19th century, the situation for Edo Japan was not so different. To the masses, the Edo bakufu, seen as the symbol of power and stability, was at its wit’s end when it came to the problems they were facing, and thus unsurprisingly, the people turned to popular religion for answers. In this way, *Sakura-hime* is mirroring the situation Edo was in during that time. A closer reading of the play, however, will show even more poignant critiques mounted by Nanboku.

First, there is the usage of the Yoshida clan within *Sakura-hime*. While the use of the Yoshida clan had been standard for *Sumida-gawa mono* since the early Edo period, usually the clan is portrayed in a negative light. This is due to the history of the Yoshida clan. Since the Muromachi period, the Yoshida clan had been actively seeking to unify all the various forms of *kami* worship and place them under its control. The efforts culminated in the construction of a cult site called Taigenkyū. Located in Kyoto, the Taigenkyū was designed to be a place that allowed the *kami* to visit the human realm, and the presence of which effectively overrode the need for other shrines, including the Ise Shrine. In other words, the Yoshida clan was actively usurping the authority of the throne by seeking to relocate and control the *kami* of Ise. For this reason, during the Edo period, although the clan continued granting imperial ranks and validations to shrines across the polity, the Yoshida clan came under constant attack by Confucian scholars like Ogyū Sorai and Dazai Shundai. The *kabuki* theatre also participated in

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96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid, 333.
mounting criticism against the Yoshida clan by associating their form of kami worship with less reputable creatures like tengu ("goblins") and others.\textsuperscript{99}

Despite their efforts to gain more spiritual and political power through their actions, the Yoshida clan did function to equalize the playing field for village-level shrines that were in competition with wealthier and larger religious complexes. By being cheaper than the imperial system of certification, the Yoshida certification and ranking for shrines was much easier for local shrines to apply for.\textsuperscript{100} The Yoshida clan was also less stubborn when it came to the requirements shrines needed to meet in order for them to be recognized; the Yoshida clan simply accepted the history of shrines under their consideration despite knowing that they falsified their own history for the sake of prestige.\textsuperscript{101} There are even cases where the Yoshida clan actively helped a shrine gain their certificate by providing them with ways to circumspect the rules established by the throne.\textsuperscript{102}

Looking back at Sakura-hime, we see that the Yoshida clan is actually glorified. Although none of the people belonging to the Yoshida house are very capable, by equating Sakura-hime, the primary figure of the Yoshida clan in the play, with the divine, Nanboku is in fact supporting the Yoshida system – a system that was ultimately more inclusive when it came to the recognition of local religious activities such as the popular religious movements I have noted. Furthermore, the equating of Sakura-hime with the hibutsu Kannon of Sensōji is a direct challenge to the Edo regime because Sensōji had been the primary temple for the Tokugawa family as well as for those praying for the wellbeing of the polity since the beginning of the Edo

\textsuperscript{99} Moriyama, Tsuruya Nanboku: naimaze no sekai, 180.
\textsuperscript{100} Maeda, 332.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 341 – 342.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, 350 – 351.
period.\textsuperscript{103} By equating the central figure being worshipped at Sensōji to the princess of the Yoshida house, Nanboku undermines the hierarchy of religious institutions as well as the idea of orthodox religious practices, putting them on the same level as popular religions and localized kami worship. In other words, Nanboku is suggesting to his audience that popular religions and millenarian movements can be just as legitimate as officially sanctioned religious practice, especially in a world of chaos on stage and off.

Second, Nanboku renders Sakura-hime as a figure representative of the grotesque, that is, a figure that represents irreconcilable extremes forced into a single body; “grotesque forms made no distinction between high and low; everything exuded from the bodies… meant at once sacredness and profanity, transcendence and secularity.”\textsuperscript{104} Sakura-hime is, as we have seen, both male and female (even if we do not consider the fact that an onnagata is a male actor playing a female role, there is still the issue that Sakura-hime is also Shiragiku), both princess and courtesan, both the target of desire and bearer of a ghost, both killer and saviour. The presence of these binary extremes within one physical body renders Sakura-hime a grotesque figure whose existence and triumph within Sakura-hime show the arbitrariness of the established value system and social order, or to borrow the words of Hirano in his discussion of another Nanboku work, because “the moral norms set by the samurai regime to delineate the boundary between good and evil dissolved into chaos,”\textsuperscript{105} Sakura-hime’s grotesque existence is both justifiable and necessary, and “[i]t is in this sense that Namboku’s story was written to signify

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{103} Kamimura, 157.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Hirano, 174.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 195 – 196.
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the bankruptcy of the samurai’s moral order.”\textsuperscript{106} The embodiment and transcendence of these binaries is a characteristic of a divine figure in \textit{Sakura-hime}.

Nanboku was, of course, not telling his audience to go out and be divine. What he was trying to show through the portrayal of Sakura-hime is that the established ways are not absolute, especially given the situation of the Edo polity in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Because of the inability of the government to deal with both internal and external problems, the world of Edo Japan was drifting closer and closer to the chaotic state of affairs Nanboku created in \textit{Sakura-hime}, and the only solution available to an average person was to open him or herself to the possibility of change, since the system of value established by the Edo government was not set in stone, and to pray for the coming of a divine saviour who could rectify the world.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 196.
Chapter 6: Conclusion: Sakura-hime as the Mirror of Edo?

Sakura-hime azuma bunshō is more than a simple parody written purely for entertainment. Commercial success would certainly have been an important consideration when the decision was made to stage Sakura-hime, and the representation of Sakura-hime as the manifestation of Kannon and the social critique that resulted from this representation is part of the reason for the success of Sakura-hime. What attracted the audience to see Sakura-hime was more than just star power; records have shown that the name “Danjūrō” by itself was not enough to guarantee commercial success.\(^\text{107}\) The audience wanted to see their anxieties portrayed on stage, and the resolution of these anxieties gave them hope for their own situation.

The world that is portrayed on stage by Nanboku is one that is chaotic. In this world, those who have a legitimate authority are powerless and cannot even save themselves. Morality merely hinders success, and only those willing to do the unthinkable will survive; the more selfish one is the greater one’s chances are. Is it perhaps conceivable that someone could mistake this description of the narrative world of Sakura-hime for a description of Edo Japan from 1770 onwards? Stripping away specific details and events, the world of Sakura-hime and Edo Japan after 1770 were not that different. Seen from the point of view of the average city-dwellers, the government as the body of legitimate authority appeared helpless to save itself from foreign threats even though dealing with “barbarians” was basically the “job description” of the Shogun. Internally, Edo Japan went through years of chaos as famines ravaged the land time and again. Efforts were made to keep the poor and starving from throwing conventional morality aside due to the dire situation but with little success. Nanboku, thus, provided a mirror for this audience.

\(^{107}\) Nakayama, 130.
By showing them a situation that was not entirely different from their own, the audience could easily project their own anxieties on to the stage and form their own associations between what they were seeing on stage and what they were experiencing in reality.
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