

4 Female Masculinity and Fantasy Spaces: Transcending Genders in the Takarazuka Theatre and Japanese Popular Culture

Karen Nakamura and Hisako Matsuo

A young man stands in front of the ocean dreaming of the adventures he will have. A young woman in a café opens the lid of the feminine waste receptacle and sees the end of her life.

(Sh_jo Kamen [The Young Girl's Mask]; Kara 1970)

INTRODUCTION

In a volume that concerns itself primarily with alternative images of male masculinity in Japan, this chapter looks at female masculinity as found in the Takarazuka Theatre and related genres of popular culture featuring heroines and heroes who transcend gender categories. We argue that the particular forms of female masculinity found in the contemporary Takarazuka Theatre, sh_jo (young girl) culture, manga (comic books) and anime (animation) create a space where both female and male fans, regardless of their sexual orientations, can temporarily transcend their everyday gender expectations and roles. These, and Takarazuka in particular, are in essence a special type of asexual, agendered space created through the actor--fan relationship. In order to understand how this happens, we need to analyze the nature of this relationship on the stage as well as the particular details of the performance of female masculinity in the creation of these fantasy spaces.

In this chapter, we first discuss how female masculinity has been theorized in the West by feminist scholars. Differentiating ourselves from those studies by our interest in non-lesbian female masculinity, we introduce the Takarazuka Theatre and its highly organized fan clubs. We then explore the dynamic that exists between the top stars and the fans, explaining how this is a form of suturing or bunshin process by which the stars become the temporary embodiment of fan desire. Broadening our scope, we give examples of men within the Takarazuka space -- as fans, directors and playwrights -- and argue that their reading of the Theatre is similarly about the creation of an agendered, asexual fantasy space. We conclude by connecting Takarazuka Theatre with popular girls' and boys' manga comic book and anime traditions in Japan, illustrating how those too serve as vehicles for escaping gender roles in modern Japan.

THEORIES OF FEMALE MASCULINITY IN THE WEST

What is special about the figure of the masculine woman? There has been growing academic interest in the field of female masculinity in the United States. Most of this has evolved from gay and lesbian studies out of a desire to understand the image of the butch lesbian (and her femme counterpart) and to re-approach the issue of alternative genders within alternative sexualities. Early feminists focused on what they saw as a conservative heterosexism implicit in butch--femme relationships, i.e. that it was some sort of "mimicry" of male--female heterosexuality.

Queer feminist scholar Judith Butler has challenged such simple readings of sex and gender. In her seminal work Gender Trouble, she notes that, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (1990: 21) for there is the “fact that ‘being’ a sex or gender is fundamentally impossible” (ibid.: 19) because these are ideal constructs which we can approach but never become. Building on anthropologist Esther Newton’s work on drag queens (1972) and Foucault’s (1980b) notion of systems of resistance and power, Butler further argues that mainstream genders are co-dependent on alternative genders for their very existence. Side A of a sheet of paper only exists because there is a Side B.

Butler and Foucault have been on the forefront of a larger movement systematically deconstructing the “objective” premises on which scientific knowledge of sex, gender and sexuality are based. Far from being limited to the humanities and social sciences, biological scientists such as Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000) have also been disassembling the notion of binary sex classifications. In her 1993 article, Fausto-Sterling famously asserted that “five sexes aren’t enough” (ibid.: 20) to classify all of the possible human sexual phenotypes available. Our division of the world into only two (male and female) sexes does not reflect the reality of human variation. Far from gender being a “cultural construct” imposed on the “reality” of sex, both sex and gender are cultural constructs.

Thus back to Judith Butler’s assertion. If there is no essential biological reality to maleness,¹ then masculine women are not necessarily imitations of masculine men. In that vein, Judith Halberstam’s (1998) Female Masculinity suggests that the study of

female masculinity can be approached quite separately from male masculinity and men. As Halberstam argues in her introduction:

Female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it has been vilified by heterosexist and feminist/womanist programs alike... Within a lesbian context, female masculinity has been situated as a site where patriarchy goes to work on the female psyche and reproduces misogyny within femaleness...

I want to carefully produce a model of female masculinity that remarks on its multiple forms but also calls for new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies. Such affirmations begin not by subverting masculine power or taking up a position against masculine power but by turning a blind eye to conventional masculinities and refusing to engage (1998: 9).

Unfortunately, most of the scholarship on female masculinity in the United States has tied it intimately to lesbianism with a strong emphasis on the physical body and physical sex acts of those involved. This may be traced to the fact that the original work on sex/gender in the West came from the psychopathologization of sex/sexual “inversions” (cf. Krafft-Ebing 1903; Foucault 1980a).

Foucault and Butler both use the life history of the nineteenth century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin as the point from which the “happy limbo of non-identity” (Butler

1990: 100) no longer exists. Coupled with the popularity of Freudian psychoanalytical theories in the early twentieth century, individuals in the United States can no longer be considered and analyzed separately from the gendered and sexualized bodies they occupy.

As a result, perhaps, there has been scant attention paid to non-lesbian female masculinities that do not involve forms of sexuality. Halberstam notes that she elides this subject but then makes the error of assuming that non-lesbian implies heterosexual:

Finally, there are likely to be many examples of masculine women in history who had no interest in same-sex sexuality. While it is not within the scope of this book to do so, there is probably a lively history of the masculine heterosexual woman to be told... (1998: 57; emphasis added).

What we see as one of the greatest tragedies of post-Freudian society in the United States is the sexualization of all human relationships from mother--infant onwards (cf. Bem 1993). This has affected critical scholarship in disallowing the possibility of asexualized relations or the transcendence of gender in non-Freudian societies.²

This is, however, what we suggest occurs within the space provided by female masculinity in the Takarazuka Theatre, some aspects of sh_jo culture, manga and anime in Japan. The particular gender of the space centered around the masculine female heroes/heroines in each allows for the creation of a space where sex, gender

and sexuality are suspended for a carefully delineated amount of time. We turn now to a more detailed consideration of these spaces, with a particular focus on the Takarazuka Theatre.

THE TAKARAZUKA THEATRE: ACTORS AND FANS

Founded in 1913 by a railroad baron, the 340-member Takarazuka Revue Company is one of the larger theatre groups in Japan and features an all-female cast playing both male and female roles in musicals, stage dramas and dance revues. All of the performers are graduates of the Takarazuka Music School where they study theatre, dance and singing for two years. During their two years at the school, the women decide whether to play female roles (musume-yaku, literally “the role of a young woman/daughter;” or onna-yaku, literally “the role of a woman”) or male roles (otoko-yaku, literally “the role of a man”). With very few exceptions, they will continue as either musume-yaku or otoko-yaku through their tenure at the Theatre.

Takarazuka has its own special language. The performers are called “students” (seito) even after they graduate the Music School and enter the Revue Theatre. The fans talk about the performers as if they were grade-school children, using special in-group nicknames and the -chan nominative suffix (Zunko-chan for the former top star Shizuki Asato, for example). Most of these “students” will “graduate” (sotsugy_suru) by their mid-thirties. In the past, most stars used to marry and become housewives, but these days many enter the movie or television show businesses. There are also Takarazuka “students” who are in their late forties and even one who is in her eighties, making their nominal childhood status even more difficult to sustain.

However, as we will discuss, this very childhood status is critical in maintaining the fundamental asexuality of the performance space.

The large majority of ardent Takarazuka fans are married, middle-aged women who are members of “fan clubs” centered around particular top stars. The fan clubs arrange group tickets for their members, who usually see each show around ten or twenty times. This is part of the reason why regular tickets are so hard to come by for people who do not belong to a fan club and serves to heighten the exclusivity of the Takarazuka world. The fan clubs also arrange tea parties (ochakai or ochanomikai) with the objects of their adoration, make lunch boxes, give flowers and presents and so forth. The fan clubs are unique in that while they are organized under the rubric of the Takarazuka Theatre, they follow the careers of particular stars. When a star “graduates” from the Theatre, the fan club attached to that actor disbands. It is through the mechanism of the fan clubs that audience members are encouraged to identify with one and only top star in Takarazuka.

Our fieldwork has focused on those fans who belong to these types of organized fan clubs and who regularly attend Takarazuka showings, “professional” fans to use Goffman’s (1963: 108) term. There are certainly many other people who appreciate Takarazuka and who occasionally attend a showing, but we have not included them in the scope of this project. When we refer to “fans,” we are referring to this professionalized group.

For many of these fans, the camaraderie of the Theatre experience is important and is what differentiates the Theatre from television or movies. One fan responded in an interview that the Theatre provided a way for her to temporarily escape loneliness in her family life:

At the time, my mother was hospitalized so that I was living alone with my father. It was like a single-father situation. I was an only child, so when I watched television I was all by myself. But when I went to Takarazuka, I was surrounded by a huge crowd. We were all watching the same thing. If something was funny, we'd all laugh together. That's why I enjoyed going to the Theatre. After that, I'd always go once a month. At the time, the S-seats only cost ¥800 and ¥300 for standing room tickets. Back then, even high school students could afford to go (Matsuo 1998b).

The fan clubs remind many of their members of their happy-go-lucky high-school days or college clubs and circles. They provide a space for empty-nesters to congregate during the day and share their experiences as middle-class, middle-aged women. At a very basic level, the fan clubs are fun and it is their frivolous nature that cannot be forgotten in any analysis.

WOMEN SEEKING MASCULINE WOMEN: FANS AND TOP STARS

Why do these women come to watch the Takarazuka Theatre? Most fans would reply that it is to see their favorite top star actors and to be taken away by the “Takarazuka Dream” (Takarazuka no yume). The otoko-yaku or male-impersonators in particular

attract legions of female fans and have often been portrayed in the context of an “ideal male” image. They are outstandingly handsome, pure, kind, emotional, charming, funny, romantic and intelligent -- that is, the complete antithesis of the salaryman/oyaji stereotype of Japanese men. With hordes of female fans adoring the masculine female actors, it would be tempting to interpret their adoration of their top stars as some form of latent lesbian sexual desire. Takarazuka playwright Ogita K_ichi responded to our question on this topic:

There are those who, looking at Takarazuka from the outside, try to understand it in terms of sexuality. That is not enough. Analyzing only the raw bodies (namami [the physicality]) of Takarazuka will lead you to ignore a completely different dimension of the Theatre -- that Takarazuka is ultimately a fantasy, a fictional creation.

That is why the Theatre has been able to continue for over 80 years without experiencing any limitations in regards to the otoko-yaku as the main role. Furthermore, I have never written a play with the intention of portraying [real] men. That is because the otoko-yaku are otoko-yaku and are not men. The same goes for the onna-yaku (female-roles) -- both the otoko-yaku and the onna-yaku are constructs that exist within a particular fantasy [or fictional space]. I do not equate them at all with the raw bodies (namami) of [actual] women (Matsuo 2000b: 120).

If it is not out of a latent lesbian desire to see masculine women, what draws women to the Takarazuka Theatre in such numbers? We interviewed one Takarazuka fan about her first experience:

Since I was born and grew up in Hy_go Prefecture [where the Theatre is based], I had seen the posters in the trains and knew about the Theatre but I had never gone to a performance. Until I actually went, my general feeling about the Theatre was, “What??? Takarazuka??? (Give me a break!).” I guess that’s pretty much a typical reaction.

So I first went to see [top star] Natsume-san’s The Rose of Versailles as an adult. When I entered the theatre lobby, my first reaction was one of surprise, “What is this?!” All around me were women and only women. The room was packed and the atmosphere was hot with excitement. There were life-size posters of the stars pasted onto the walls. It seemed to me like it was a different world (ijigen) altogether.

Finally the curtain went up. The actor playing the role of [Axel] Fersen rose up from the center of the stage through a hidden trapdoor carrying the doll Stephan. For the next three hours I was transfixed. Every time an actor walked on the apron stage, I could only sigh, “h_,” that’s all, “h_.” I was surprised by what was a totally new experience for me. Then, by accident, my eyes drifted towards the André character played by Ruko-san. “Ah! She’s so cool (kakko_)!” Oh no, I thought to myself, “she’s so cool!” The most

vivid memory was when the actor playing the role of Oscar [Jarjays] revealed herself as a woman and danced in a duet. Wow! I felt like I overcame something [inside of myself]. So this is what Takarazuka is like (Matsuo 1998a).

Her story shares many common themes with other women we have talked with. The first is the feeling that Takarazuka represents a place outside of normal time and space. As the interviewee notes, most “normal” (that is, non-Takarazuka) people have a somewhat prejudiced image of the Takarazuka Theatre and its fans as being rather over the top. She overcomes her own internal resistance during the theatre performance when she allows herself to realize the “coolness” of the actor Ruko-san who is playing the male role of André. It is at this point that she is able to enter into the Takarazuka world, allowing Ruko-san to be her bunshin or alter-ego on the stage (see below).

It happened that this fan was also a lesbian in her personal life. We asked her if there was any connection between her lesbian sexuality and her adoration of the Takarazuka Theatre:

Even if there was a lesbian among one of the students [i.e., stars], I have the feeling that they would only be [lesbian] during their time in that world. After leaving the Revue, I don't know what would happen to them [i.e., they might get married and have children]. About the fans well, I don't participate in the [festivities] surrounding the stars coming into and out of the

Theatre, I just come to the Theatre to watch the show and go home. So how am I supposed to meet [any other lesbians]? ... There are other places for that, for example the group Tokyo Sh_nen [with vocalist Sasano Michiru, who came out as a lesbian]. It's much easier to go to other groups to look for that kind of thing (ibid).

When the same fan was asked what she saw in one of her favorite otoko-yaku stars (i.e., to see if she experiences sexual desire for them), she responded:

When Non-chan [otoko-yaku top star Kuze Seika] performs... even before you get into whether being an otoko-yaku is natural or unnatural... she fits perfectly into the character itself. I feel a lot of warmth from her character. Perhaps that's what I seek in the Takarazuka otoko-yaku, that feeling of warmth (ibid).

When asked further about whether she experiences any sexual desire for the Takarazuka stars, the fan again rejected that interpretation of her feelings for the stars. We have encountered this with other fans who are lesbian as well, who do not connect their sexuality with the appeal they feel for Takarazuka. They are lesbians who are fans of Takarazuka, not Takarazuka lesbian fans.

BECOMING A FAN: SUTURE AND BUNSHIN

If not through sexual desire, then what is the process by which audience members enter and engage in fictional works like Takarazuka and identify with otoko-yaku

actors? In the Subject of Semiotics, film theoretician Kaja Silverman develops the concept of “suture... the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers” (1983: 195), or the process by which the viewers identify (and interpellate themselves into) the position of the subjects on the screen. That is, Silverman argues that we cannot analyze the process of viewing film as merely reactive; rather it is inherently an active process, a discourse that can itself be subject to discourse analysis. Although the film experience differs from being in a stage audience, we can borrow some of Silverman’s ideas relating to gender relations on the stage. The process of identification with one of the protagonists is of course an essential part of the suturing process. The character we identify with becomes our alter ego, or to use the Japanese term, bunshin.³

The problem, especially for women audience members, is finding the appropriate protagonist on screen or stage to suture into. In an opaque style driven by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Silverman explains why women cannot participate equally as audience members with men. She argues that the traditional film structure denies female viewers full subjectivity because of their inability to fully suture with the male actors because of female viewers’ lack of a penis. Furthermore, they have a wary relation to women who represent symbolic insecurity. Male viewers, however, can fully suture with the male leads who act both as mirrors of their idealized self-image and of fathers and role models. They can further suture with the female actors who represent “warmth and nourishment” (i.e., the mother) (ibid.: 234).

Removing the psychoanalytic penile baggage from Silverman's argument, female audience members cannot fully invest in the film or stage experience because they cannot identify with either the male heroes because they are male or the female leads who are not portrayed as empowered. We have heard this in our own interviews with fans when asking them why they are not attracted towards traditional (male) Japanese theatre on one hand, or towards the female musume-yaku in Takarazuka on the other. For example, Natori Chisato, a married female critic of Takarazuka, put it this way:

The presence of men no longer creates any desire (akogare)⁴ in me. Through the male body of my husband, the image of "man" (otoko) has changed from what used to be a distant yearning to becoming that of a friend, an enemy and that of a kindred spirit in the loneliness of our human existence... When I see female actors trying to approach an ideal image of femininity on the stage, I sometimes feel painfully like I am looking at myself. But when I see the otoko-yaku actors in their endless struggle to distance themselves from [their] femaleness, I enjoy the refreshing thrill of seeing the delicate balancing act between possibility and impossibility (1990: 113).

Takarazuka is often portrayed as a fantastic space. For fantasy to work, it must provide something outside of the normal. The fans remark that they find it difficult to "enter" (hairikomu) or suture to the bodies and roles of male stage actors because of their male sex; as well as into the bodies of feminine female actors because of their female gender.⁵ Nimiya Kazuko, another married female Takarazuka critic, remarks:

If I wanted to see real men, I'd go to another theatre... Among female fans of Takarazuka, there are much fewer fans of the musume-yaku female performers when compared to the otoko-yaku male impersonators... Women know the female condition very well, thus it is hard to cherish the dreams [that the female characters have on stage]. That's why women can't become fans of the female leads.

The main reason I cannot accept the explanation that “women are attracted to the otoko-yaku male impersonators because they perform the role of being ideal men” (ris_no otoko) is because I have no ideals (ris) that I hold men up to. I have no expectations (kitai) towards men either. Or perhaps I should say that I do not want to have any expectations towards men. This might serve only as an explanation for myself, but I arrive at the conclusion that when women look at the otoko-yaku male impersonators, what draws their attention is not the “ideals we hold to men” but rather the “despair we attach to men” (1995: 132).

When interviewing Takarazuka playwright Kimura Shinji about the male roles in the Theatre, he responded in very similar fashion to Ogita K_ichi, above. Fantasy is a key element that allows people (the stars, playwrights and fans) to transcend the physicality, the moment, and to immerse themselves into the Theatre where they can experience pure emotion.

I think the existence of the otoko-yaku is wonderful. To give an example, the story of Romeo and Juliet is about a young daughter and son caught in the fate caused by the war between their two families. It is difficult to represent this [on the stage] in a contemporary and realistic way. However, I can directly engage the themes of love and fantasy into the storyline by borrowing the fictional construct (kyok) of the otoko-yaku. As an artistic creator, a storyline that exists within a fictional construct gives me extremely flexible material to work with. Through the Theatre, our own human souls experience yearning (akogare), despair, depression and other emotions.

The “Dream Story” [that Takarazuka provides through the otoko-yaku] becomes a way for us to find the real Truth [about the human condition]. It is only through the fictional construct of the otoko-yaku that we are able to directly engage and get pulled into the Theatre experience (Matsuo 2000b: 117).

Building on the theories of experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, Japanese theatre critic Suzuki Tadashi wrote in Engeki to wa Nani ka (What is Theatre?) that the theatre is “an area where the audience and the actors co-exist simultaneously” (1988: 53). Audience members use the body of the otoko-yaku to directly enter and engage in the world presented on the stage. This is the process of building an alter-ego or bunshin alluded to in the first interview.

By acting through the otoko-yaku as alter-ego, the audience experiences emotional catharsis and can play with roles outside of their own. It is precisely because the otoko-yaku is a female masculine/masculine female fictional construct that the audience can do this -- they cannot immerse themselves quite as easily with male-actors-playing-male-roles or female-actors-playing-female-roles. For the fans, this is what fundamentally what differentiates Takarazuka from other theatre and revue acts in Japan in which men play lead roles. The introduction of physical sexuality either between the male and female roles on stage or between the fans and stars would only serve to block the process of this emotional catharsis. The Western settings of most of the musical dramas, the garish costumes and make-up and outlandish stage names of the Takarazuka, further combine with the female masculinity of the otoko-yaku to create the unrealness that allows for an escape into the fantasy realm and identification with the otoko-yaku.

The reality of the stage experience itself aids in the direct suturing process. As suggested by Suzuki Tadashi, there is a special quality to the live stage experience that brings actors and audience into close relationship. Unlike film where each perfect shot and cut creates an illusion of seamless perfection, the stage has a “sticky” human quality. Each actor tries their best and their fans hang on their every word, sharing their emotions as well as their failures. One of the fans relates her experience of a star missing her lines:

Out of the eighty actors on the stage, one really caught my eye. That was [otoko-yaku] Mami Rei. Her individuality really stuck out. First, she’s really

tall, right? She has a really high-pitched voice, right? Her eyes are bright and clear, like a Westerner, right? And then she's really tall... perhaps it's because they made the sleeves and hem of her kimono too short and she had on a [male] wig with a bald spot.... there was something about the Westernness of her body along with the Japanese-ness of the role that didn't fit together. It was that disparity and her extraordinary beauty that caught my eye. I just couldn't keep my eyes off her.

Mami-san then sang, "From Atago-yama I saw the horses pulling the carts, the dogs pissed and made a hole!"

The whole crowd burst into laughter after she finished that line. Next to her were Nao Sumire and Uraji Natsuko. After the song finished, Mami-san turned over to Sumire-san and whispered her, "What was the next line?" That was picked up by the wireless mike and the crowd burst into laughter again.

The real line wasn't "the dogs pissed and made a hole" but "the horses pissed and made a hole." I didn't understand that at the time. But the whole crowd was laughing and I was taken along with their merriment (Matsuo 1998b).

As the majority of the fans in the audience have already seen the same play at least several times, these small slips are immediately recognized. But the audiences come back each time because the drama unfolds in new ways with small variations. Each time, the fans can re-immense themselves in the fantasy space and the illusion of

reality is maintained by the humanness of the performance, something which cannot be said about film in which each screening is the exact same.

MEN AND THE TAKARAZUKA SPACE

As this volume is about masculinity in Japan, in this chapter we might additionally mention of the presence of actual men in Takarazuka, who also enjoy female masculinity. Most of the directors and playwrights are male as are many of the backstage crew.⁶ There is a small but growing percentage of men who attend Takarazuka -- usually first on the insistence of their wives and girlfriends, but who then find their own space within the Theatre experience. Although we would expect heterosexual men to be primarily attracted to the musume-yaku stars, on the contrary most of the male fans seem to be attracted to the otoko-yaku top stars, perhaps finding in them a way to transcend their own physical maleness and enter the fantasy world of Takarazuka. The artifice of female masculinity allows men to suture themselves just as efficiently as women.

Matsuo interviewed one of the male orchestra staff about sexuality within the Takarazuka space:

When rehearsing, there are the otoko-yaku as well as the onna-yaku and musume-yaku. The musume-yaku usually wear a long skirt over their dance leotards. They are dressed, at the very least, in a feminine way. But I don't think a single male staff members feels any "female sexual attraction" (onna no iroke) from them. Similarly, the otoko-yaku have sharper movements and

are more dashing than normal women. They also have shorter hairstyles. But I think it would be very difficult to see them as “lesbian--bitches” (rezubian no tachi yaku). The reason for that would be that [at their core] they exist as actors -- they must kill any remnants of their own gender within themselves. Another way to say this would be that they must eradicate any notion of “male” or “female” -- as actors they exist as only as [empty] figures. They do this to the utmost limit so that they can become the frame for the roles of the otoko-yaku or onna-yaku.

For example, [top onna-yaku star] Hanafusa Mari recently played the role of Elizabeth [in the musical of the same name]. One of the male staff members said to me, “Even when she wears a leotard, I can’t detect any ‘woman’ [femaleness] in that child.” I don’t think that is limited to just Hanafusa Mari, it’s impossible to detect [sexual] pheromones from any of the Takarazuka students (Matsuo 1999).

In the types of letters and commentary that fans write to Takarazuka magazines as well as in our interviews, we have not seen an appreciative difference between male and female fans in their attraction to the stage and the actors. Their attraction to the Theatre is not a sexual one, although it is driven by a mutual desire to escape the gendered normal world of Japanese society for even a few hours.

FEMALE MASCULINITY, SH JO AND FREEDOM FROM SEXUALITY

In his 1996 article, John Treat highlights the importance of sh_jo (young girl's) commodity culture in modern Japan. Acting like sh_jo (a small girl) provides a space for Japanese women outside of the bounds of adult Japanese female responsibility:

The word most often associated with this sh_jo culture is kawaii, or “cute.” This aesthetic value is directly linked to the consumer role that sh_jo exist to play. A kawaii girl is attractive, and thus valorized, but lacks libidinal agency of her own. While others may sexually desire the sh_jo -- and indeed, another phenomenon in the Japan of the 1980s was the talk of the rorikon “Lolita complex” of adult heterosexual males -- the sh_jo's own sexual energy, directed as it is towards stuffed animals, pink notebooks, strawberry crepes and Hello Kitty novelties is an energy not yet deployable in the heterosexual economy of adult life in Japan (1996: 363).

In English, gender is binary -- at every stage one is either “male” or “female.” But in Japan, one might well argue that sh_jo constitute their own gender, neither male nor female but rather something importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual reproduction (ibid: 364).

Performing sh_jo is one active and dynamic way that Japanese women can control their sexuality. As the opening quote from writer Kara J_r_ depicts, men have been portrayed as being able to dream of transcending their current state, going off to faraway lands. In contrast, women are constantly reminded of the responsibilities that their bodies and gender roles restrict them to within Japanese society.

In her historical analysis of early twentieth-century Takarazuka, Jennifer Robertson (1998) argues that the performance of what she calls the “androgyny” in Takarazuka is an amalgamation of both male and female, a zone of deep eroticism. Robertson bases her argument in part on prewar Japanese newspapers and conservative social critics who fret about the increasing sexual deviance that they read in Takarazuka and popular culture, as part of a larger concern about aberrant sexuality in that period. In the postwar period, however, we find that most of that discourse has disappeared and our own ethnography of modern Takarazuka does not reveal the “lesbian subtexts” (ibid: 61) that her earlier study did. Most of our informants, both lesbian and straight, as revealed in the interview data we present here, explicitly reject a sexualized reading of modern Takarazuka.

Although most sh_jo forms focus on reversion to a prepubescent girlhood with ribbons and frilly skirts, Takarazuka is a sh_jo fantasy space that allows grown Japanese women -- for the space of a few hours -- to revert to a prepubescent stage of tomboyism, thus escaping the immanence of their bodies and their sexuality. The female masculinity on the Takarazuka stage is fundamentally a prepubescent asexual one -- a reversion to the tomboy years of freedom before adult female responsibility symbolized by the blood of menarche. As Judith Halberstam writes:

We could say that tomboyism is tolerated [in the West] as long as the child remains prepubescent; as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl.... Female adolescence represents the

crisis of coming of age as a girl in male-dominated society. If adolescence represents a rite of passage ... and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment and repression. It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity (1998: 6).

In Japan, escape for women is possible through reversion to a pre-pubescent state. We believe that for most Takarazuka fans, sexuality in the interactions between the fans and stars is inconceivable.⁷ The stars -- who are symbolically presented as “students” and “young girls” -- are not the objects of sexual desire. They serve instead as the empty vessel for fan dreams, the bunshin or alter ego. Everything about Takarazuka, from organization of the “fan clubs” as childlike spaces to the “graduation ceremonies” when stars step down from the stage, reemphasizes the essential childishness and childhood purity (i.e., freedom from sullyng sexuality and sexual responsibility) of Takarazuka.

Top Takarazuka otoko-yaku star Makoto Tsubasa comments on how the otoko-yaku role is just that, a role: “Acting [as an otoko-yaku for me] is essentially about deceiving (damasu) the audience” (Matsuo 2000a: 8). Many top stars also use the metaphor of “killing themselves” in order to get into character. Top otoko-yaku male impersonator Shizuki Asato was famous for sewing teddy bears together during show intermissions, in great contrast to her strong, masculine stage performance. Many are

aware, from the stars to the fans, that the Theatre is just theatre and the actors are just actors.

We must emphasize that the “escape” from adult responsibility and reversion to childhoodness in Takarazuka and sh_jo culture is both temporally and spatially bounded in order for the viewers to be unbounded from normative expectations. Takarazuka serves as a vacation from adult responsibility; but it operates in similar ways to real vacations, which are appreciated because of the presence of the work that centrally provides one with a core ikigai or meaning to life (Mathews 1996). Takarazuka is a bracketed experience that fans go to and return from. They do not live within that space permanently.

In many ways this mirrors the consumptive freedom of male erotic comics that Anne Allison analyzes in her Permitted and Prohibited Desires:

I [argue] that play and desire are always interconnected with the paths people assume to make a living, reproduce a community and move from childhood into adulthood. In this sense, desire is not reduced or repressed as much as it is actively produced in forms that coordinate with the habits demanded of productive subjects. The “dullness” and “arduousness” of the tasks Japanese must execute over a lifetime, starting in childhood, are made acceptable not by the mere threat or force of an external structure (fear of failure on exams, for example). More powerful is the internalization of a different sort of process, one based on desires that make the habitual desirable as well as

making escape from the habits of labor seem possible through everyday practices of consumptive pleasure (2000: xv).

In his critique of Japanese comics, Frederik Schodt (1986) also notes that Japanese readers are able to make distinctions between fantasy and reality in ways that most American cultural critics are not. The extreme violence and sexuality in manga and anime for men and boys are not representations of deep repressed desires. Similarly, the gender transcendence in Takarazuka Theatre and homosexuality in women and girls' comic books do not necessarily speak to a larger yearning for homosexuality and gender transgression in the housewives who make up the majority of the fan audience. The fantasy spaces in both instances have utility only because they have no connection with reality.

THE ORIGINS OF “BEAUTIFUL WARRIOR GIRLS:” TAKARAZUKA, SH JO MANGA AND THE TEZUKA CONNECTION

Starting in the mid-eighties, there has been a growing theme of beautiful aggressive girl warriors in Japanese anime and manga such as Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds (1984), Bubble Gum Crisis (1985), Ghost in the Shell (1995), Battle Angel Alita (1994)⁸ and so forth. With lithe bodies often strengthened by exoskeletal armor, these young women replace the earlier generation of young male heroes fighting evil. In his book titled Sent Bish jo no Seishin Bunseki (The Psychology of Beautiful

Girl Warriors), Japanese author Sait_ Tamaki (2000) argues that the increase in female heroines displacing male heroes in boys' comics is a response to the growing feeling of inadequacy among young Japanese men. In order to escape into the world of anime, they can no longer immerse themselves in fantasies involving male figures, whose responsibilities (to fight; to improve themselves; to protect their families) and flaws all too closely mirror their own. The sent_bish_jo warrior--princesses provide them with a vehicle of purity, strength and purposefulness that they find lacking in their own lives.⁹

In her groundbreaking literary analysis of Japanese anime, Susan Napier quotes Tamae Prindle on the centrality of sh_jo images even in male culture:

Surely the nation's gaze is more and more focused on girls. Girls occupy a distinctive place in Japan's mass media, including films and literature. What fascinates the Japanese is that the sh_jo nestle in a shallow lacuna between adulthood and childhood, power and powerlessness, awareness and innocence as well as masculinity and femininity (Prindle cited in Napier 2000: 119).

We argue that the female masculinity of Takarazuka occupies the same "shallow lacuna... between masculinity and femininity." Napier goes on to link sh_jo with anime directed towards men and boys:

In contemporary Japanese society, girls, with their seemingly still-amorphous identities, seem to embody the potential for unfettered change and excitement that is far less available to Japanese males, who are caught in the network of demanding workforce responsibilities. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is the female Kusanagi [playing the central role] in Ghost in the Shell who melds with the [androgynous/masculine] Puppet Master, or that it is [male character's] Ranma's transformation into a girl that gives the series its narrative pleasure (ibid.).

The original gender-bending warrior girl was of course the Princess Knight (1978; Ribon no Kishi) by Japanese manga and anime demi-god Tezuka Osamu. The story involves a young girl, Sapphire, born as a princess to a royal family. For various reasons Sapphire is raised as a son and heir to the throne. The story line revolves around plots by evil courtiers to reveal Sapphire's true gender, all of the time while s/he struggles with balancing both sides of his/her gender presentation. At moments a dashing prince and later reappearing as a gorgeous princess, Sapphire seems to have it all. Princess Knight is important because it is seen as the first real sh_jo manga as well. In the postscript to the bound-book edition of the manga, Tezuka responds to why he started drawing it:

I can say with absolute certainty that the Princess Knight which appeared [in the magazine] Sh_jo Club is the first appearance of a Japanese story sh_jo manga.

Up to then, sh_jo manga consisted of funny and humorous comics about everyday life (seikatsu manga), Anmitsu Hime (Princess Anmitsu) is a good example of this.

In the Fall of 1952, I was visited by the then-Editor of Sh_jo Club, Mr Makino. He asked me whether I could draw a story manga like [my previous works] Tetsuwan Atomu [Atom Boy] or Janguru Taitei [Kimba] but for girls (sh_jo). I immediately thought of transposing the Takarazuka Theatre, which was immensely popular with girls, into manga form. I told him I would give it a try (cited in Murakami 1998: 104).

It should be mentioned that the young Tezuka grew up in Takarazuka City and was a common visitor to the Takarazuka Theatre with his mother, who has a huge fan of the stage. From the original Princess Knight, the genre of sh_jo manga grew, developing such classics as the Rose of Versailles (1972--4) by Ikeda Riyoko, which also features a cross-dressing prince who is really a princess. By that time sh_jo manga in general was playing heavily with themes of gender role transgression and subversion.¹⁰ The immense popularity of the 1974 stage production of the Rose of Versailles by Takarazuka caught the attention of all of Japan. As manga commentator Schodt notes, “As a result boys as well as men -- including academics and literary types -- finally took note of what was happening in girl’s comics” (1986: 100).

It took about a decade for the developments in sh_jo manga to filter into the mainstream. In 1984, best-selling manga artist and animator Miyazaki Hayao created

his enormously popular Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds (Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä) with a strong young female lead drawn strongly from the sh_jo tradition. The foil or antagonist is provided by a powerful princess, who while motivated by her own goals, cannot be classified as wholly evil as in the Western comics tradition. Miyazaki commented on his need to have female heroines and anti-heroines rather than male heroes and anti-heroes:

If we try to make an adventure story with a male lead, we have no choice but to do Indiana Jones, with a Nazi or someone else who is a villain in everyone's eyes (Miyazaki 1988, cited in McCarthy 1999: 80).

In order to transcend gender, to emphasize his themes of purity and strength, he had to make his heroes female:

Nausicäa is not a protagonist who defeats an opponent, but a protagonist who understands, or accepts. She is someone who lives on a different dimension. That kind of character should be female rather than male (Miyazaki 1984, cited in McCarthy 1999: 79).

Takarazuka playwright Ogita notes in one of our interviews relates this to his own need for having female heroines on his stage:

Superficially, the heroines in Miyazaki Hayao's anime are female, but more important than their gender is their purity and innocence (mushou).... That is

perhaps the similarity between his work and Takarazuka (Matsuo 2000b: 120).

FEMALE MASCULINITY AND THE FUTURE OF GENDER RELATIONS IN JAPAN

At the end of the day, the Japanese housewives who are enchanted by the dashing figures of the otoko-yaku stars still have to return to their families, cook and clean for their husbands and children. The Theatre provides an escape but it is temporally bounded. Is this kind of gender escapism merely a type of “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) with no real long-term impact?

Perhaps we are expecting too much from the Takarazuka Theatre. It is, after all, commercial entertainment -- neither an evil standard bearer of gender conservatism and commodity fetishism nor the savior of all womankind and lesbian -- feminist transcendence. But, our own observations suggest that the collapse of the Japanese economy and the ensuing dissipation of the Japanese dream (“My car, my home, my wife,” etc.) have created more space for alternative gender configurations to erupt. Furthermore, by reading more deeply into the reasons why both men and women go to the Takarazuka Theatre, we can better understand gender relations in Japan today.

The growing popularity of the Takarazuka Revue among men in Japan can be seen as part of a larger movement away from stereotyped forms of male masculinity. Gender is being recreated in new, active and dynamic ways, whether it is a new generation of Japanese men seeking refuge and solace from the pressures of their gender in the

warrior--princess anime adventures of young women; or, Japanese housewives finding transcendence and purity in the otoko-yaku male-impersonators of the Takarazuka theatre. Both are in some ways reactions to what the critic and housewife Nimiya Kazuko describes as the “despair we attach to men” in contemporary Japanese society, the absence of purity, innocence and hope.

NOTES

¹ Although we like to imagine the penis as symbolizing the difference between men and women, it is truly only that: symbolic. In our everyday interactions with people who we imagine to be male or female, we usually have no way of accessing the “truth” (i.e., checking for the presence of the symbol). Instead, we treat their sex as if it is congruous with their gender performance.

² We posit that Japan is such a nation. That is, the popular discourse on the self in Japan has not been structured through the lens of gendered Western biomedicine and Freudian psychoanalysis as it has in the United States. For one discussion of Japanese psychotherapies, see Reynolds (1980).

³ Related to the Buddhist concept of henshin, bunshin originally referred to appearances of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas in various guises (cf. Gill [1998] for a discussion of henshin in Japanese popular anime). Especially on the stage, bunshin has taken on a meaning close to that of alter ego -- the other self or projection of self.

⁴ Although akogare is most often translated as “desire” or “yearning,” it should be remarked that it is a purely platonic desire or yearning, distanced from sexual attraction.

⁵ One exception, however, has been the enormously popular Elizabeth role played by top musume-yaku star Hanafusa Mari in the musical of the same name. The strength of this character (based on an Austrian opera) who struggles against the limitations set by her female gender, allowed for fans to suture themselves into her.

⁶ We should mention that there are two female Takarazuka playwrights who have debuted their work at the Theatre. There are also female conductors and the main composer of the Takarazuka Theatre is a woman.

⁷ That is not to say that there are absolutely no fans (either male or female) who sexually fantasize about Takarazuka. They can easily be found (as with anything else imaginable) on the Internet in their own chat rooms. However, the quote provided here suggest that many fans do not engage Takarazuka in a sexual fashion.

⁸ Titles are from the U.S. releases (only Battle Angel Alita differs significantly, it was originally released as Gunm in Japan). Release dates are from the original Japanese releases. All are available in translation in DVD or graphic novel form now in the U.S.

⁹ It should be noted here that similar motifs of the warrior-princess have emerged in the U.S., also attracting legions of heterosexual male fans: Lara Croft (Tomb Raider); Buffy the Vampire Slayer; and, Zena Warrior Princess. Sait_'s entire thesis is rather complex and very difficult to summarize in one paragraph as it also involves the phallic sexualization of the beautiful warrior girls. By attaching a penis to the warrior girls, Sait_ argues that the image is complete for the "otaku" dispossessed men who find them so appealing. The girls have all of the purity of femininity and because they have a penis, they become the vessel (bunshin) for the men to suture themselves to. This analysis of feminine masculinity requires, of course, an entire separate chapter in and of itself.

¹⁰ For example, a common theme in contemporary adult sh_jo manga is male homosexuality. One interpretation is that because the women who are reading this feel constrained by the limits of female heterosexual roles, the body of the male homosexual and homosexual relationships allow them to explore the full domain of emotions and pleasures. Because manga characters are fictional and due to censorship laws do not have penises, they do not have the same penile suture problem that women encounter with real human actors on the stage or in films. Lesbian relationships are rare in mainstream sh_jo manga.

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