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Aesthetic journeys and media pilgrimages in the contexts of pop culture and the creative industries from and to East Asia

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Aesthetic journeys and media pilgrimages in the contexts of pop culture and the creative industries from and to East Asia

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Undermining the gendered genre: Kabuki in manga

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ABSTRACT

According to Jaqueline Berndt, Thomas LaMarre, and other critics, manga is a highly participatory media form. Narratives with vibrant characters and creative inconsistences in the plotline encourage the reader to recontextualise the text, create new contents and unfold activities which go beyond reading (such as fan art and CosPlay). Recent popularity of manga about Japanese traditional arts – for example, Kabuki – further expanded the potential interaction with manga and other popular media to include (re)discovering traditional Japanese culture. Examples, such as Kabukumon *by Tanaka Akio and David Miyahara (*Morning *2008-2011), or* Kunisaki Izumo no jijō *by Hirakawa Aya (*Weekly Shōnen Sunday *2010-2014) and a variety of other manga, anime and light novels exemplify this tendency. Consequently, influential franchises, such as* Naruto *and* One Piece *boast adaptations as Super Kabuki stage-plays. Furthermore, Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto observes how thematic and stylistic overreaching in contemporary manga further distort the notions of the gendered genre that lays at the foundation of the manga industry. In this case, Kabuki theatre as a theme employs a variety of gender fluid characters and situations. For this purpose, Kabuki manga utilise cross-genre narrative and stylistic tropes, from overtly parodying borrowed tropes, to homage, and covert inclusions. On the example of Kabuki-manga I will explore a larger trend in manga to employ elements of female genres in male narratives, thus expanding the target readership. My paper explores specific mechanism that facilitates reading manga cross-genre, I also inquire what novel critical potential thematic and stylistic exchange between audiences may entail.*

Introduction

There is a tendency to compare system of signs that constitutes comics to a language. Manga is no exception. Indeed, a typical example of a story manga incorporates reiterated character designs and sets, text of the dialogues that more or less anchors the meaning, as well as such recurring elements as: genre-specific panel layout, speech bubbles, graphically embellished onomatopoeia, speed lines and icons (sweat drops, pinched nerves etc), or metaphorical flowers and internal monologues. The narrative is fragmented into these elements, which are reiterated and cite each other, creating an illusion of continuity from a combination of individual pictorial signs and text. Manga necessitates a level of "literacy" to seamlessly consume these works. However, in "Ghostly:

'Asian Graphic Narratives,' *Nonnonba*, and Manga" (2013), Jaqueline Berndt sees beyond analysing the interrelation of signs that constitute manga as syntax. Instead, Berndt focuses on the language-like potential of manga to facilitate variety of connections between different readers around the same title, and the resulting creative output:

> [...] Naming manga a 'visual language' points beyond the issue of decoding sweat beads or nose bleeds. It refers, above all, to the existence of specific communities that value less a single work's aesthetic or ideological qualities than its facilitating relationships and support of reader participation, from empathy and immersion to fan art/fiction and CosPlay. (Berndt, 2013: 365).

Readers from different age and income groups, educational background, or social class find themselves addressed by the same work and come to share a variety of interpretations of the title. These diverse readers establish taste-communities around their shared title or specific interpretations thereof. And as recent scholarship attests, it is not uncommon for the readers to consume the genres that were not catering to them as their core audience.

It needs to be mentioned that Japanese manga has evolved in the form of genres based on the target audience's age and gender: *shōjo* (girl), *shōnen* (boy), *josei* (young adult female), and *seinen* (young adult male). This comes from manga weekly and monthly magazines being the primary sites of the titles' initial serialisation. The practice which is maintained today as well. Gendered genres may encompass any type of thematic genre, however, there is a consensus that gendered genres are distinguishable by their visual aesthetics as well as recurring character settings, the tone, and emphasis on specific types of character relationships. Periodical magazines aimed at specific readership allow for even stylistically hybrid works to be identified as belonging to respective gendered genre.

Cross-Genre Readings

Azuma Hiroki discusses a specific mode of creation and consumption of generic narratives that he attributes to the latter half of the 1990s, when Japanese franchises — media-mixes— began to privilege multiple versions of the narrative that may continue and expand or reimagine and contradict previous instalments. The multiplication of possible alternative developments that media-mix propagates, results in a franchise that facilitates

and virtually encompasses the derivative works. In *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (2001) Azuma suggests that contemporary popular texts offer deliberate inconsistencies. To the consumer, who is knowledgeable in generic conventions these gaps in the narrative provide an impetus for interactive engagement, and facilitate multiple readings. Contemporary titles even offer deliberate openings that imply among others such frequently mentioned cross-genre readings as *yaoi*[1] interpretations of popular mainstream media.

From a formalist perspective in his essay "Weird Signs: Comics as Means of Parody" (2001) Frahm draws attention to the specific formalist traits of spatial arrangement of sign systems of text and pictorial images in comics, and refutes notion of unity and sequence, touted by McCloud as an axiom of comics reading: "the reading of comics is precisely *not* about reconstructing unity (of whatever) but rather to appreciate the heterogeneous signs of script and image in their peculiar, material quality which cannot be made into a unity" (Frahm, 2001: 177). Frahm sees closure as only one of many possible readings, offering specific avenues for structural analysis of the comics-text as facilitating multiple readings (Frahm, 2001: 179). Frahm's analysis reverberates in the way Thomas LaMarre engages with different levels of meaning construction in manga through the emphasis on the linework in his influential article "Manga Bomb: Between The Lines of Barefoot Gen" (2010).

Following Frahm's analysis, my methodology for this article is informed by Judith Butler's theory of performativity, and specifically the notion of parody[2]. I will explore how the character is constructed to fluctuate between humorous effect that stems from juxtaposition of *shōjo* and *shōnen* tropes, and facilitating literacy of the female genre.

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[1] derivative works that reimagine male characters as having romantic and sexual relationships.

[2] In her seminal work "Gender Trouble" Judith Butler famously associates drag with parody. She states: "[...] gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (Butler 1990: 138). By which she refers to drag, which is a combination of the performer's sexed body, their innate gender identity, and the embodiment of gender identity that is contradicting inconsistently performer's sexed body or their gender identity. And as such may constitute exactly the embodiment of the drag gender identity. This fluctuating relationship between the triad of sexed body, embodied gender, and gender identity draws attention to the fallacy of the notion of gender as stemming from something innate and natural. Allegedly we fashion our bodies to outwardly represent our internal gender, which may or may not coordinate with our sexed bodies. However, the notion of this internal gender is a "fantasy of a fantasy", built via negotiation of the dominant discourse of patriarchy rather that from some kind of innate sense of self (related to our sexed bodies) (Butler 1990: 138).

The parody cites a recognisable text yet imbues it with different meaning for more or less comedic effect. On the one hand parodic effect depends on the knowledge of the source materials. However, if the same element can have multiple meanings, the element's meaning within initial context may be questioned as well.

I will focus both on the narrative as well as on the formalist convention that facilitate meaning as negotiable, contextual and relative. According to Frahm (2009), in comics, text reiterates information that is given in images, sometimes clarifying, sometimes supplementing, and the images do the same to the text. Consequently, to Frahm, each of these sign systems signifies each other, and reveals the absence of "original". Frahm refers to comics as structural parody that parodies precisely the relation between the sign and what it signifies[3].

As a result, one may acknowledge that the meaning of any sign is relational and contextual. The parody in this case is therefore of something existing beyond or before the signs and the heterogeneity of signs among themselves rather than the signs as signifiers that reference an actual signified. Signs at most reveal the discourse within which their paradigmatic relationships become coherent.

As such, the rudimentary structural level of comics appears to support the tendency of the industry to open the text to commercially lucrative multimodal readings. Which may be facilitated as Barthes and Fish would suggest by the reader's context, spurred by seeking the correct reading or by playing consciously with possible meanings.

However, there is an obvious hierarchy in which popular titles are consumed by extended audiences across genres. Scholarship agrees that the most widely accessed genres are *shōnen* and *seinen*, which are also habitually analysed as manga proper. In other words, these "masculine" genres had been widely read by "female" readers.

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[3] In the case of comics, the structural parody reveals the contingency of the relationship between sign and reality. By what means? The constellation of signs of different kinds in comics does not only show that typographical and graphical signs are related. In their heterogeneous materiality the signs in constellation are already self-referential. We may even say that the signs, because of their being self-referential, imitate each other in their claim to signify a thing beyond the signs (an "original"; Butler 1990: 138). The structural parody of comics thus shows us a constellation of script and image in their material difference, being juxtaposed and integrated at the same time. It parodies precisely that claim for a truth beyond the signs, and directs our attention to the constellation of signs itself. Because comics offer us a system of signs in its own right which seems to integrate the heterogeneous script and image, the structural parody calls into question this apparent unity (Frahm, 2000: 180).

LaMarre (2009), Fujimoto (2015), and Bauwens-Sugimoto (2016, 2018) point out aspects of cross-genre reading through the perspective of the female genre readers, who are allegedly courted by the male genres.

Conversely, the discussions of male readers of *shōjo* genres also exemplifies similar recontextualization paradigm. Especially male fans of *shōjo*-inspired *lolicon* genre, offer an insight into the mechanism of out-of-context readings. One of the most recent and competent *otaku* analysis *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan* (2019) by Galbraith describes in detail how with the popularity of The Magnificent 49ers in the late 70s among male critics and readers, a growing number of male fans of *shōjo* manga emerged. However, these fans in the next few years, began to formulate their specific reading of *shōjo* genre within the communities and share their interest via self-published fanzines — *dōjinshi*. These derivative works evolved into a new parodic and erotically charged genre of *lolicon*, which idolised young girl protagonists strongly reminiscent of *shōjo*. Overwhelming popularity of *lolicon* in turn opened the gates for these young female characters into *shōnen* and *seinen* narratives. However, despite being derived from *shōjo* genre, it does not appear that the *shōjo* in *lolicon* titles are appealing (or are made less offensive) to the female reader in 1980s[4].

Thomas LaMarre (2009) and Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto (2016) agree that consideration of the female reader in masculine genre became evident since the early 2000s. Moreover, during this period, the number of female authors of the *seinen* and *shōnen* manga grew.

As Bauwens-Sugimoto notes in "Queering Black Jack: A Look At How Manga Adapts to Changing Reading Demographics": "at least half, and sometimes more than half, of the readers of 'manga for boys' do not identify as male" (Bauwens-Sugimoto 2016: 112)[5]. Industry recognised the consumerist power of these non-male fans and began to specifically accommodate these readers by including *shōjo* and BL manga-like

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[4] Although more academic consideration may be necessary to confirm this.

[5] Instead of trying to win back their target audience, many editors and artists are interested in making sure their works please the readers they demonstrably have. A possible reason for this is that even the largest shōnen manga magazine, Weekly Shōnen Jump, while still selling over two million copies a week, has trouble achieving sales anywhere near the level of its heyday in the early 1990s, when the print-run was six million copies a week. Catering to the needs of their current readers and customers, more and more male artists are incorporating elements that appeal to female readers (Bauwens-Sugimoto, 2016: 112).

aesthetics and narrative tropes, as well as reimagining the existing lolicon-based female character into approximations of *shōjo*.

While apparent diversity of readership may undermine the notion of a gendered genre, manga is still serialised in magazines, referencing specific group of readers. Moreover, there is a marked disbalance between readers, who identify as female consuming "masculine" genres and "male" readers reading genres aimed at the allegedly "female" audience. As such we may theorise that, reading both so-called "gender appropriate" genres and reading across-genre, becomes a part of individual gender performance [6]. At the same time, in the age of such generic ambiguity, maintaining gendering of the genres has a potential to offer male readers an opportunity to consume materials that reference *shōjo* and *josei* genre tropes. Arguably, a type of content that otherwise would not be sought out by a reader, uninterested specifically in cross-genre reading.

Centrality of Character

The central element of any generic narrative is the character. Azuma Hiroki suggests that postmodern consumer prioritises engaging with an attractive character and participating in creation of derivative works over the individual stories and worlds (Azuma, 2009: 49). The character/characters are likewise at the crux of the media-mix[7].

It is thus unsurprising that the character finds him or herself at the centre of the discussion when cross-genre readings of manga are concerned. Be it analysis of *fujoshi*[8] reimagining male friendships in masculine genres into romantic scenarios, or male *lolicon* fans consuming *shōjo* characters in pursuit of *moe*-triggers.

The genre-specific characters in manga and anime are referred to as the "soulful bodies" by Thomas LaMarre in his seminal work *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (2009). Such a character embodies generic tropes within his or her design. LaMarre looks at these designs twofold: on the one hand, the character design is a

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[6] The whole spectrum of gender identification of the reader involved in these practices needs to be addressed more thoroughly from gender studies perspective. To make the argument concise, I will use the terms "male" and "female", mimicking the terminology of the gendered genres.

[7] Steinberg in his article "Condensing the Media Mix: Multiple Possible World in the Tatami Galaxy" (2012) likewise analyses how Japanese franchise building privileges the character rather than the world.

[8] Fans of *boys' love* genre.

compilation of traits that by citing previous generic works, reveal the character's personality, narrative role, and possible scenarios. On the other hand, the character design constantly embodies characters' emotions. For example, when a character shrinks into a super-deformed *chibi* form, the reader is provided an insight into this character's amplified emotion.[9]

> [...] bodies on which supposedly inner states, spiritual, emotional, or psychological tensions and conflicts are directly described, appearing on the surface in character design, implying potential movement of the body and of the soul. (LaMarre, 2009: 228).
>
> The soul, that is, movements of feeling and thinking, is inscribed on the surface, explicating itself in advance of any narrative explication. (LaMarre, 2009: 230).

In recent scholarship, inclusion of *shōjo*-manga derived characters (*shōjo* and *bishōnen*) in masculine genres is theorised as one of the key elements that proves that *shōnen* and *seinen* genres are actively inviting female manga readers. In *The Anime Machine* (2009) LaMarre exemplifies the discussion of what he terms the "female address" with analysis of *lolicon*-like manga and anime *Chobits*. The creators of *Chobits* — CLAMP — are a group of female artists who became famous for their *shōjo* manga and then expanded into s*hōnen* and *seinen* genres. In 2000-2002 they created a *seinen* title for *Weekly Young Magazine* (Kōdansha). This periodical primarily targets young adult men. However, LaMarre explores how female readers are evidently considered via a set of narrative and visual tropes[10] (LaMarre, 2009: 218, 222). Central to his discussion is the character Chii — an android-shaped personal computer.

> This brilliant set-up allows CLAMP to pose the question of what a woman is. While it may seem that the answer lies between the legs of the gynoid persocom (that is,

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[9] Variety of techniques introduce characters' perspectives, inviting reader's emotional involvement through eye-close-ups, shot-reverse-shot sequences, extreme comical deformations that visualise characters affects and emotions, as well as internal monologues, and (especially characteristic of *shōjo* manga) symbolic visualisations of character's emotions that extend their body with costumes, symbols, decorations and other elements.

[10] For CLAMP, the so-called "absence of the sexual relation" has a pragmatic valence. When asked about the anime adaptation of the manga, Ohkawa Nanase says that the idea was to make an anime that wouldn't embarrass girls. In other words, although the manga is clearly addressed to young men at one level, CLAMP addresses girls at another level, whence the relative modesty in portraying bodies and genitals—no money shots, as it were. The combination of a *seinen* mode of address with shojo sensibility results in sexual situations without actual sexual relations—sex without sex (LaMarre, 2009: 222).

the truth lies in female anatomy), *Chobits* does not allow for such a simple answer. Instead, it shows "woman" as an effect of socially structured relations. Which to say, the persocom is a woman insofar as Hideki treats her as one. The question "computer or woman?" turns into a question about the construction of "woman." Will Motosuwa treat it/her as a computer or as woman? (LaMarre, 2009: 218, 223).

Chii is arguably a *lolicon* character (adolescent body with a mind of a child), yet at the same time she strongly references a *shōjo*-manga protagonist in the way she looks, is dressed in an array of elaborate costumes. The costumes, according to LaMarre, are referencing *shōjo* genre. And in shōjo genre the costume not only revels character type, but also extends the character's interiority, communicating both personality and emotions. The way the frills and lace envelope Chii's android body evokes *shōjo* character and her fine, complex emotions. The soul is implied by the outward manifestation of combinations of signs. In this case clothes are strongly associated with personality traits.

The costume also fragments and conceals the android body. The parts which are glimpsed beneath the costume, lead the viewer of anime or reader of manga to reconstruct a feminine "whole" that is implied. However, the body beneath is narratively a machine that approximates a shape of human female. Ultimately, Chii's femininity depends on the elements of *shōjo* manga that are generated around her android body. The costume conceals the "reality" of her being a computer, and, being an intrinsic part of her "soulful body", visually communicate an array of *shōjo*-like emotions. Moreover, narratively, she yearns for her one true love, which is not conveyed to Hideki, but only to the reader/viewer. LaMarre suggests that Chii becomes a *shōjo* character, through emphasis on these emotive costumes, and her fragmented nudity that reveals only the parts of her that imply her female body rather than reveal her mechanical make-up. *Shōjo*-like aspect of *Chobits* is further amplified by her non-patriarchal and subversively sexless relationship with the doting, yet immature male protagonist Hideki. For the reader a combination of recognisable costumes, that extend Chii's sweet and sentimental interiority, in combination with the ambiguous power-relationship with Hideki, successfully opens this title to reading from *shōjo*-manga perspective despite all the risqué jokes.

After the *shōjo*-protagonist, an attractive male protagonist "*bishōnen*" is another staple of *shōjo* genre. *Bishōnen* can be defined by his soulful body — his personality and his emotions — represented through the same generic tropes as the female

protagonist. He is an identification anchor, elicits empathy similarly to a female protagonist, but also serves as on object of another character's or the reader's desire. These male protagonists are frequently accessorised with complex emotive costumes, flowers, decorations, sparkles, emotional close-ups, and internal monologues that visually and narratively reveal their interiority[11].

Bauwens-Sugimoto in "Queering Black Jack: A Look At How Manga Adapts to Changing Reading Demographics" analyses male characters as catering to the female gaze in Sakamoto Shinichi's *Innocent* (*Weekly Young Jump* 2013-2015) and *Young Black Jack* by Ōkuma Yūgo (*Young Champion* 2011-2019). Similarly to LaMarre, Bauwens-Sugimoto emphasises their physical beauty and lavish costumes, as well as occasional nudity that in both titles is used to amplify the vulnerability of the protagonists. Specifically, she observes how depictions of male protagonists, nude and vulnerable, in scenes of emotional anguish, or physical assault, positions them as an object of the gaze and eroticises these episodes in the way that specifically references boys' love (Bauwens-Sugimoto, 2016: 121).

Onnagata as *Bishōnen*

In many *shōjo* manga *bishōnen* are protagonists, and in the *shōjo*-derived genre of boys' love, they are playing both romantic leads. The eponymous "beauty" of *bishōnen* can be implied, through the way he is depicted as an object to the gaze of another character and simultaneously as an object for the gaze of the reader.

Bauwens-Sugimoto addresses *bishōnen* as a **visually** identifiable character type in combination with fluid agency as inherent of *shōjo* manga and as such recognisable within her examples of *seinen* manga. Correspondingly, LaMarre notes in his analysis of *Chobits* an unstable, fluid power dynamic between android Chii and the male protagonist Hideki.

Following LaMarre's argument, I suggest that *bishōnen* as a soulful body incorporates female genre to a degree that entering the diegesis his presence brings a potential to read

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[11] Here a note needs to be made. Not all contemporary *shōjo* manga are excessively flowery. However, a strong emphasis on the aesthetic value of the linework and other visual elements remains unchanging. Famously laconic in their panel layouts and use of visual metaphors Ono Natsume, Yosinaga Fumi, Est Em all design their works to be extending their character's interiority and imply the dynamic of the portrayed relationship.

the narrative as a type of women's manga. Labelling these titles as masculine preserves the well-established hierarchy between "universal" masculine and auxiliary feminine contents. However, when *bishōnen* enters male genres, he influences and expands the definition of "masculine contents", resulting in men acquiring new literacy, and end up reading *shōjo* manga, labelled "masculine".

In order to explore this argument, I will exemplify my hypothesis with an analysis of a novel type of gender non-conforming character in *shōnen* and *seinen* manga — a recurring cross-dressing *bishōnen.* I specifically limit my inquiry to manga about kabuki. I will elaborate with a help of a case study, how *onnagata* — male performer of female roles in kabuki — can be frequently recognised as a *bishōnen* and how he is integrated and function as a part of *shōnen* manga.

Onnagata is a character who is bound to naturally occur in narratives set around kabuki. As *onnagata* stage performance entails a gender-bending element, *onnagata* are frequently depicted borrowing elements of *bishōnen*'s soulful body, especially the emotive, evocative costume that is coherent as an element of a *shōjo*-derived soulful body. This character is also habitually exposed to an objectifying gaze of another character, the audience, or is offered to the reader's gaze. His objectification can be integrated in a variety of ways from becoming a butt of a joke to a gender-conscious dramatic twist.

Traditional arts and crafts as narrative setting gained in popularity since early 2000s in manga, light novels, anime, and other popular media. Consequently, kabuki as a setting is readily found in all genres of manga, and quite a few notable works feature *onnagata* as protagonists or one of the main characters[12]. Most *onnagata*-characters in these titles are depicted, referencing recognisable aspects of the *bishōnen*[13].

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[12] This coincided with Kabuki theatre itself opening to collaborations with manga and anime. In 2010 *Somemoyō chūgi no goshuin* a kabuki play about a same-sex romance, based on an Edo period play, was advertised as boys' love kabuki. Super Kabuki troupe, renown for updated, modernised kabuki plays since 1980s, staged *One Piece* (2015), and Shinsaku Kabuki troupe released *Naruto* (2018) and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (2020). These new plays are performed by trained Kabuki actors from prominent families with the traditional male-only cast.

[13] In particular, the following recent titles can be considered kabuki narratives: the *shōjo* manga *Pintokona* by Ako Shimaki (*Cheese!*, 2009-ongoing); *Irokaneru* by veteran *shōjo* manga artist Masumi Kawaso (*Hana to Yume*, 2011–2014); *Kabuki Iza* by female newcomer Sawa Sakura, with a style heavily reminiscent of *shōjo* manga (*Comic Beam*, 2012–2014); with respect to *seinen* titles *Kabukumon* by

I focus on the *onnagata*'s depiction as *shōjo*-manga derived character type *bishōnen*, and analyse the character tropes that open *onnagata*-character to interpretation within the context of the female genres. In this article I will focus on the use of cross-dressing for comedic effect.

As a case study, I will analyse *bishōnen* in *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* by Hirakawa Aya (*Weekly Shōnen Sunday* 2009-2014). *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* parodies the recognisable major genre tropes and cliches. On the one hand, this title exemplifies recent tendency to include *shōjo* and *boys' love* manga tropes into *shōnen* and *seinen*. However, the female genre tropes are parodied alongside tropes from *lolicon*. Moreover, in some jokes the character design specifically may seem to reference more risqué niche genres' such as *shōta* or *otoko no ko*. However, taking into consideration that this title is published in a *shōnen* manga magazine, it seems unlikely that niche pornographic genres are expected to be recognised as readily as *shōjo* or *lolicon*, which in its milder form is not uncommon aesthetic in *shōnen* titles[14].

It gives rudimentary *shōjo* manga tropes new meanings that provoke humorous reaction. As such *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* demonstrates to what extent a *shōnen* manga anticipates recognition of female genre tropes. Simultaneously, this title offers an insight into the mechanism of gradual introduction of the new generic literacy by elaborating on and expanding the scope of reappropriated *shōjo* and *boys' love* tropes.

Kabuki theatre is a traditional Japanese theatrical artform that goes back to early Edo period (1603-1868). Kabuki in Edo period was an eclectic popular lower-class entertainment, concerned with sensual pleasures, violence, and physicality. After Meiji era however it was gradually censored and shaped into a classical art form known for its rigidity (Mezur, 2005: 135)[15]. After a brief period of women performing kabuki, by

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veteran artist Akio Tanaka and script-writer David Miyahara (*Morning*, 2008–2011); *Juntarō* by bestselling author Motoka Murakami (*Big Comic*, 2011); *Onmyōji* by Munku Mutsuki (*Monthly Comic Ryu*, since 2012); and finally a *shōnen* title, *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* by Aya Hirakawa (*Weekly Shōnen Sunday*, 2010–2014) among others.

[14] As a matter of fact, *Weekely Shōnen Sunday* was the magazine which serialised Takahashi Rumiko's famous manga *Urusei Yatsura* (1978-1987), which had great influence on the *lolicon* aesthetics.

[15] Contemporary Kabuki performances are all based on *kata* – symbolic codified acting tropes for each play, that include movements on stage, lines, and ways to perform them, costumes and make up, and virtually exclude possibility of ad lib.

mid-17th century after a string of *bakufu* decrees, only men were allowed on stage, resulting in male actors — *onnagata* — taking over female roles.

Kathrine Mezur postulates in her book that *onnagata* performances do not reference femininity, rather they combine "feminine" acts with historical *onnagata* acts. In Edo period *onnagata* wore female clothes offstage, behaved like proxy "women", but also served as male prostitutes (*kagema*) to their male and female patrons. Which did not preclude them from having their own wives and children. As such *onnagata* combines a notion of feminine allure with desirability and objectification of *kagema*.

The performing body of an *onnagata* is fragmented into areas that create a link both to the fiction of femininity and to the materiality of the male sexed body of an actor. The costume mediates *onnagata*'s performance. Similarly to *shōjo* manga, *onnagata's* costume communicates character type (princess, courtesan, wife, etc), it also can extend the character's interiority through manipulation of its symbolically charged parts, such as sleeves, hems, neckline and so forth. Finally, it conceals and segments *onnagata*'s body. An actor's face, the nape of his neck, his hands and feet are the only visible parts. Kimono helps to create multiple reading of the performer's body. The elements of feminine allure imply *onnagata* as an objectified woman — the role they play on stage. At the same time, the same parts, such as larger hands, feet, Adam's apple betray the male body beneath.

> The idea of the body beneath is virtually inseparable from how an onnagata is perceived by spectators. Spectators interact in their imaginations with the onnagata's surface articulation and his body beneath. A spectator's perception of the body beneath is shaped by individual, cultural, racial, class, and sexual differences. [...] They may experience desire and attraction, loathing and revulsion, or any number of feelings, all of which are charged with personal and cultural taboos. [...] Without the viewer's awareness that onnagata are constructing and enacting a female-likeness with a male body beneath, there is no kabuki onnagata (Mezur, 2005: 9).

The same set of elements is read differently, as it is filtered through the context of the spectator — *onnagata* performance acquires meanings between *onnagata* and the audience.

The ambiguity of a kimono, in combination with erotically charged non-covered body parts became a trope in manga about kabuki. They are used to elicit such multiple reaction to *onnagata's* role and body beneath, in another character as well as in the

reader. The fragmentation of a character's body through costume is further amplified with the fragmentation of panels and pages.

Onnagata as a manga character tends to incorporate another popular contemporary stereotype — an *onnagata* as an expert in traditional culture. Contemporary *onnagata* regularly appear in *women's* life-style magazines, they are called on as experts on traditional arts, craft, and elegant pastimes, moreover, they are prompted to comment on desirable femininity, frequently reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes. As a result, these off-stage images of *onnagata* are also marketed towards women as non-threatening objectified masculinity[16].

It appears that *onnagata* offers an alternative masculinity for the women to consume, rather than for the men to imitate. To the generation of "good wives, wise mothers", *onnagata* are unthreatening and open to objectification. What happens when such an *onnagata* becomes a protagonist of a *shōnen* manga?

Case-Study *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō*

My case study — *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* is a debut serialised work by a female manga artist Hirakawa Aya[17] (*Weekly Shōnen Sunday*, 2010–2014). The title parodies *onnagata*, and at the same time parodies the tropes of female genres. In order to do both, Hirakawa intersperses *shōnen* tropes with *shōjo* visual and narrative elements. Typically, the humour is derived from the *onnagata* characters appearing as women to someone, who

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[16] For example, one of the most recognizable contemporary *onnagata*, habitually referenced by manga artists, is Bando Tamasaburō V. Tamasaburō is portrayed in TV-programs, magazine interviews and other media outlets, as a connoisseur of traditional arts and crafts, expert on expensive kimono fashion, fabrics and accessories, make-up, and a variety of activities that the heroines he performs would most likely be interested in. There is definite overlap in the elegant images he brings to life on stage and the off-stage persona that is produced in a variety of popular media. His sexuality, family or relationships are omitted from his interviews, instead his single-minded dedication to rehearsing and training for the role are discussed and perpetuate the narrative that he only lives for the stage. His image combines a superhuman body, that is concealed with layers of kimono, with perfect performance of beauty, grace, elegance, and objectified vulnerability, which roughly approximates "femininity". Tamasaburō's on and off-stage persona appears to be mostly marketed to the affluent middle-aged women, who assert their agency over these images, in essence objectifying him. Tamasaburō's anniversary edition photobook *Tokubetsu aizōban: Godaime Bandō Tamasaburō* [Special Edition: Bandō Tamasaburō V] (2008) included a piece of a kimono he wore on-stage, an imprint of his stage make-up on a *tenugui*-towel, and an autograph, all arguably very personal and erotically charged attachments. This luxury edition is sometimes available for 500.000 yen through his web-page on demand: http://www.tamasaburo.co.jp/goods/index.html

[17] Hirakawa Aya's next project with *Weekly Shōnen Sunday* "Tenshi to Akuto!!" (2014-2018) also deals with some gender bending, with male protagonist working as a female-voice voice-actor.

doesn't know they are crossdressing, and elicit a romantic or a sexual response before revealing they are men. Alternatively, the onlooker may be fooled despite knowing, and the joke is based on the inability to differentiate between performance and reality. Essentially, it reinforces the heteronormative paradigm, not to mention that the images of femininity that *onnagata* produce are predominantly those of utmost passivity. However, at the same time, the tone of the jokes becomes increasingly risqué in terms of representation of the same-sex male desire as the narrative progresses. And at the same time representations of LGBTQ characters grow more and more sympathetic, with final volumes including some overt same-sex love confessions and ruminations on the topic of same-sex love.

Already from the earlier volumes, it is clear that in order to grasp the gist of the jokes, the reader is anticipated to have a certain capacity to recognise such *shōjo* manga citations as leaves, floating in the strategically timed gusts of wind, a variety of flower-metaphors, sparkles, and other symbolically charged embellishments, as well as enjoy the humour derived from such juxtaposition. This provides an opportunity to analyse the changes in visual aesthetics, narrative emphasis on emotion rather than action, and alternative image of male protagonist that extend definition of masculine content, while remaining overtly labelled "masculine". As such "masculine" label sanctions the consumption of the hybrid contents evident in *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* by male-identified reader.

The character design of *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* looks basic mangaesque with large heads, thin bodies, huge saucer-eyes, and colourful hair[18]. Protagonist Izumo is a misogynistic sixteen-year-old. As a child he was a promising young *onnagata*, but eight years prior quit kabuki, anxious that it was impacting his manliness. He reluctantly returns to the stage to save his family honour— the manliest reason ever — despite his disdain for having to cross-dress and pretend to be a woman. Narrative development is typically *shōnen*-like, Izumo polishes his skills by taking on stronger and stronger adversaries and finds loyal allies. However, this story undermines the shōnen manga tropes by making Izumo better than anyone at kabuki and cross-dressing rather than

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[18] On the covers and illustrations.

martial arts or sports. He is at the centre of *bishōnen*-filled narrative that introduces several major LGBTQ characters.

Clean linework and coherent panel layout in combination with plenitude of speed-lines, dynamic movement, onomatopoeia, and attractive and colourful character-designs balances between *shōnen* style and *shōjo* citations. Predominantly the lines are flowing and bouncing, the squabbles between the characters never become life-threatening, and the jocular violence does not hurt them. In short, the linework is similar to what Thomas LaMarre refers to as "plastic lines" (2010). Disney-like soft outlines that visually interact with the outside forces. Characters deform on the impact, and bounce back, unharmed. As such, plastic line channels the character's life force, implying him as immortal throughout the narrative or in the specific episodes[19].

While plasticity is characteristic of jocular scenes in *shōnen* manga, where characters clash without actually being injured, in a multitude of episodes the flowing "plastic" lines in *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō*, acquire a distinctive *shōjo* aesthetic. Panels become bigger and irregular shape, they are populated with emotive close-ups, and decorations. The kabuki costumes are used to visually extend and emphasise character's emotion. These depictions are a staple of all stage-performances and emotional exchanges between characters, especially as the various relationships between the characters develop into close friendships, familial bonds, and even same sex loves.

The binary of Izumo's bratty and combative masculine self, Izumo's gentler emotional side, and Izumo's crossdressing are implied with very comprehensible distinct linework. Using what Oshiyama Michiko (2008: 165-170) refers to as feminine and masculine visual traits.

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[19] These lines also impact the reader on a more immediate visceral level, prompting direct reaction to the form above recognition of the content. Which is opposed to structural, realistic and angular line, that conveys character's mortality and fragility as well as emphasizes the cognitive recognition rather than visceral reaction.

Masculinity	Femininity
Face: Narrow eyes, less emphasised eyelashes, longer face, high nose, bigger mouth, emphasised brows.	**Face:** Wide eyes, round eyes (innocent), long eyes corners turned up (promiscuity), long eyelashes, round face, small nose, small mouth, thin brows.
Hair: Shorter hair, dark or subdued coloured hair (brown, dark blond, blue-blond on illustrations), appears dark on the monochrome drawing, limited highlights.	**Hair:** Conventionally light hair (blond) or colourful hair, longer hair, curly hair, a lot of highlights showing the glossiness of the hair, elaborate hairstyles.
Body: Bigger body frame in relation to other characters, wide shoulders, broad frame, musculature.	**Body:** Smaller body frame in relation to other characters, narrow shoulders, narrow body, no muscle.
Clothes: Masculine clothes, suits, uniforms, emphasised masculinity of the body-shape.	**Clothes:** Feminine dress elements, flowing fabrics, frills, lace, patterns, emphasises the smallness of the frame.

In episodes, where Izumo behaves in a "masculine" way, his face has straight brows slightly drawn at the nose, and frequently a mischievous one-sided smile. His hair spikes up as well. It is especially evident in fighting, arguing *shōnen*-like sequences. Izumo's "feminine" self has round and raised brows, shinier eyes with longer lashes; he has a soft smile, and his expressions are demure and aesthetic in emotional or artistic *shōjo*-like sequences.

I begin with an analysis of the distinct *shōjo*-like sequences. As a part of the narrative, they visually build up the gravity of the situation, but usually — end with a joke and a punchline: "I am a man!!!" With the protagonist switching into his *chibi*-mode and wreaking havoc. As such heteronormativity is restored at the very end and appears to justify the prolonged segments of gender-queer content.

Shōjo-manga like sequences are associated with *onnagata* cross-dressing on-stage episodes, which in this manga serve dual purpose. On the one hand they establish Izumo's artistic dominance over whoever challenges him, on the other hand they indirectly resolve relationships conflicts between characters. These scenes are always depicted with elements of *shōjo* manga. Moreover, by volume 10, all of them are highlighted through *shōjo* manga tropes.

These tropes include: irregular panelling and splash pages with costuming details, reiteration of emotional facial close-ups, mostly accompanied with internal monologues, metaphorical flowers, gusts of wind and other decorations that extend, accessorise, and otherwise supplement visualisation of character's interiority.

The scene generally opens with a panel/panels decorated with flowers, stars, and sparkles and is comprised of shot-reverse shots that portray character's perspective and convey their feelings via internal monologues. They also include: movements with focus on the body parts (close ups and/or slow motion) that allow sensory empathy with characters.

Izumo's first *onnagata* sequence is similarly structured. In order to pay a debt to another *onnagata* who helps him out when he is bullied, Izumo reluctantly agrees to replace his saviour on stage as Yūgiri, a famous courtesan role from *Kuruwa Bunsho*. A double spread slows down the action. First, we see a full body *onnagata* figure in elaborate costume, with his face hidden behind a wad of paper (Hirakawa, 2009: Vol. 1, 40-41). He slowly takes the paper away to reveal on the next splash page a gloriously beautiful Izumo with sparkles, flowers and slowly falling petals. The panel layout so far is not as complex as some impressionistic shōjo titles. However, already at this juncture the splash pages are used for a decorative emotionally charged full body portrait that details the costume. The clothes in combination with large close up of the face demonstrate the elegance and ease with which Izumo assumes the courtesan's role (Hirakawa, 2009: Vol. 1, 42-43).

Izumo's face is pensive, as the role dictates; on the next page he looks up and smiles gently. In the lower tier small panels show the audience's thrilled reaction — from that exceptional face some veteran spectators recognise him as the talented child-actor he was before his hiatus (Hirakawa, 2009: Vol. 1, 42-43).

The metaphorical petals and leaves continue to blow thought the next double spread. The first narrow tier explains the plot of the play — in this scene Yūgiri can finally reunite with her one true love. A small panel zooms in on the opening of the sleeve; the sleeve is reiterated and placed in the spotlight in the large panel that shows Izumo's gentle facial expression, the scoop of the *eriashi* (erotically charged kimono neckline at the back), and his fingers peeking out from the embroidered sleeve in an elegant gesture. This mini-slow-motion accentuates and extends the movement, from

the right page, continuing the motion to the left page. Finally, Izumo and his co-actor strike the *mie*-tableu pose (Hirakawa, 2009: Vol. 1, 44-45).

Panels are slanted, indicating the rising emotions. All *shōjo*-manga like elements appear to indicate that this beautiful inspired Izumo is immersed in an artistic reverie, however his inner monologue reveals that he is just relieved to be done with the play. Such parodic inconsistency of text and image creates unexpected humorous effect. The reader is led to believe in Izumo's sincerity via associating the recurring visual tropes with their meaning in *shōjo*-manga. However, the text brings the reader back into the framework of *shōnen* manga, that specifically parodies the excessive emotionality of female genres. Following Frahm's argument, the reader is reminded of the precarious interrelationship of text and image. Our complacency as closure driven readers is geared to be used against us.

However, the title immediately follows up, not yet breaking with the *shōjo*-like sequence. As Izumo's attention is arrested by the applause; a close-up of his startled and thrilled face invites the reader to empathise with this time genuine emotion. Turning the page reveals a splash page of both actors with their back to the reader and a panorama of a standing ovation in the theatre. Izumo's eyes are zoomed in upon, showing him stunned with his success and recalling in a two-panel flashback the elated feeling he would get when he was a child actor. The fragmented slow-motion-like panel layout with emphasis on the emotional movement and linework is again referencing *shōjo* manga. On the next page we see the last panel of what I suggest can be read as a markedly *shōjo* sequence, as Izumo smiles genuinely and happily. In this episode the eyes are used as mirrors of the soul, as both Izumo's artistic inspiration and his joy at being on stage communicate with the reader and other characters. This time the mood is broken by a comically relieved face of Izumo's co-actor, but Izumo himself remains in sync with the soulful body implied by his costume and *shōjo*-like focus on his face (Hirakawa, 2009: 44-47). As such here drag in manga and manga as drag works on different levels simultaneously. The scene begins with soulful body being juxtaposed with the innate "gender" of the character. Granted "gender" here is almost synonymous with elegant, elated and sincere emotion that Izumo is supposed to portray. However, as the scene progresses the same soulful body finds itself in tune with character's interiority, and alternatively is juxtaposed (by the other character's comical relief) with the "gender" of the genre itself. As the *shōnen*-ness of the episode is restored. As such

the *shōjo* tropes are used two-fold, to trick the reader and elicit laughter, and then to transform into homage, all within the same sequence. Visually the transition is imperceptible, it is the anchoring text that offers some distinction, drawing attention to the way the signs interact and contradict each other, as such bringing to the fore two systems of signs interacting within the underlying discourse of patriarchy.

Next, I would like to offer an example of the emotionally charged sequence that depicts not only Izumo's splendour on stage, but rather his caring nature. It utilises a mix of *shōnen* manga like comedy, interspersed with highly emotionally charged panels that demurely borrow from *shōjo* manga, yet eschew explicit citation, thus maintaining visual consistency of the scene. In the following sequence, Izumo stages an intervention during a performance that aims to resolve the conflict of two brothers from prominent kabuki family Sugawara — Matsuki and Umeki. Sugawara Brothers hate each other, due to a misunderstanding, yet end up in the same production, playing rivals on stage, vying for the love of Izumo's character Yatsuhashi in *Kagotsurube*. Respectively, Umeki is Einōjō, Yatsuhashi's true love, while Matsuki is Jirōzaemon — the villain. Yatsuhashi becomes involved in the love triangle and is supposed to get killed. Coming to the scene when the killing should take place, the sequence starts with Izumo grabbing the sleeve of Umeki-Einōjō, and in a close-up of his beautifully made-up face, with a cheeky smile demands in a masculine non-kabuki speech that Umeki stays on stage despite his part being over. Then Izumo returns to kabuki-like speech, and replacing the names of Umeki and Matsuki with Einōjō and Jirōzaemon passionately explains to Matsuki and Umeki the convoluted misunderstanding that resulted in their feud. Izumo is coming closer and closer to Matsuki's face, clearly implying some degree of sexual tension. The reverse shot from Matsuki's perspective depicts the extreme close up-of Izumo's face. Izumo is blushing, with brows raised in sincere emotion, he is also crying. There are no excessive flowers in the panel, though Izumo slips into his feminine persona: his eyes are glittering with tears, eyelashes are longer, and he raises his brows. His lips are shaded, and he is blushing. The brothers notice he is crying. And Izumo goes into a comical paroxysm of embarrassment, claiming that he has something in his eye. Again, the visual tension created by gradually amplifying Izumo's beauty and emotion in the eyes of his co-actors (and the reader) is disrupted with the text of the dialogue.

The next page brings the reader back into an emotional exchange of gazes between the brothers. Umeki and Matsuki's eyes in close ups communicate emotion, as all

characters indiscriminately are portrayed through these tropes when their interiority is revealed to the reader (Hirakawa, 2010: v.3, 124-125, 126-127).

A whole page is devoted to Umeki and Matsuki exchanging glances in a series of close-ups that vacillate between *shōnen* icons such as sweat drops and dramatic emotional closeup reminiscent of *shōjo*, until Umeki finally proclaims in a large portrait-like panel: "This was the only way I could do it..." as he walks off along *hanamichi* to an ovation (Hirakawa, 2010: v.3, 124-125, 126-127). The slow-motion emotion-centric scenario, visual tropes, linework, and panelling all interact, eliciting empathy with the characters and their personal drama. *Shōjo* mode of depiction vacillates between laughing off the deeper emotions as something feminine. Yet at the same time these emotional scenes resolve conflicts and communicate genuine interiority of the characters. The reader is invited to move between all these visual and textual clues, multiplying possible readings and effectively playing with the inconsistency and heterogeneity of signs both between the cited genres and between text and pictorial image. Such scenarios are constantly reiterated in *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* — Izumo finds out that someone he knows is suffering some personal trauma and uses his cross-dressing and his *onnagata* skills to relieve this suffering.

While this scene borrows from *shōjo* in a more demure way, comparatively to the Yugiri scene referenced above, it reveals how the *shōjo* visuals are gradually integrated into not only jokes, but the main body of the narrative, and as the manga progresses, these tropes become more overt and consistent. In fact the later volumes are markedly differing from the manga's beginning in its overall panel layout and visual decorations. The emotion, sensuality, and tactile experience of costume is more defined. The *shōjo*-like evocativeness of the costumed body is amplified with beautiful poses and sequences of movement, close-ups, and slow motions. Such visual excess may also be attributed to the artist's growing confidence in portrayals of complicated *kata* and anatomy in the on-stage sequences. The visceral sensuality of the movement in combination with plastic lines that extend bodies with decorative elements such as wind, flowers, stars, and other elements open characters for all levels of participation from the reader. These depictions are further enforced with emotional internal monologues offering these scenes as introspection into characters as their bodies gracefully take on exalted poses, making the emotional drama driving force of the narrative.

Furthermore*, Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* offers nuance that distinguishes between Izumo's *shōjo* femininity in scenes where he is caring and kind, and explicit *moe*-like objectification when he is sexually harassed by other men.

"*Moe*-mode" portrays isolated instances of complete objectification, not always does it correlate with Izumo's wearing female attire, rather it focuses on all occasions where his beauty arrests someone's attention. In these sequences Izumo is displayed, yet he is never looking back. The most basic formula of these scenes is a shot-reverse shot. When Izumo's aroused-looking face or clueless passive expression is depicted in a close-up, but the reverse shot explicates that these are emotion projected onto him by the onlooker.

Constantly harassed for his good looks, Izumo conflates objectification and femininity. Thus, his argument against objectification — "I am a man!" — naively assumes that men/masculinity cannot be objectified. Izumo's male body and the strict code of honour are the two axis of "masculinity", reiterated liberally after almost every joke. Usually, the code of honour is used when Izumo reinterprets queer situations to feel comfortable with (*onnagata* is a superhero, maid café pays good salary); the male body is evoked when Izumo objects to someone else objectifying him.

Moe-derived tropes represent the type of "femininity" that Izumo fears, "woman" as a soulless object that reflects male desire. Such superficial objectification is framed by the scenarios of voyeuristic consumption: maid café, miss school pageant, father spying on Izumo taking a bubble-bath. As a rule, these scenarios depict onlookers who are not concerned with Izumo's real feelings.

These *lolicon* and *boys' love* reminiscent "*moe*" jokes gradually amplify and include more and more *boys' love* elements, building on similarities in depiction of sexualised vulnerability typical of both genres. *Lolicon*-derived cross-dressing images are gradually replaced with increasing number of tropes from *boys' love,* (with character design sometimes visually similar to *shotacon*[20] due to Izumo's youthful looks and short stature). These humorous episodes become lengthier.

By volume 15 there is a three-page long sequence that combines visual tropes of passivity and childishness typical of classic *uke* character (Hirakawa 2013: vol. 15, pp.

[20] An erotic manga sub-genre with underage male character in sexual situations, despite its roots in *boys' love,* contemporary *shotacon* is frequently aimed at a male readership.

122-123-124). Izumo's father Yakumo is a frequent butt of incestuous jokes, unable to overcome his own son's innate erotic appeal. For this reason, Izumo vehemently opposes performing a love-scene with him. Meanwhile, the father goes into a paroxysm of excitement as he imagines how their rehearsal would develop into a tryst. Lower panel portrays Izumo as an infantile receptive partner — *uke* — sitting on his father's lap, wearing short pants that accentuate his bottom.

Perpetuating rape-fantasy like scenarios of 1990s and early 2000s *boys' love*, Izumo is reluctant, but father pushes his affections onto him. In a smaller panel Yakumo is depicted leaning over Izumo, between his legs, and an ambiguous shading appears to imply Izumo is naked from the waist down. Next is a large panel from Yakumo's on-top perspective, it depicts Izumo on his back with his legs held up and parted by Yakumo's hands. Izumo is sweaty, his shirt is hiked up, and from that angle it looks like he is not wearing any pants. His flushed face is the focal point of the panel, teary-eyed, his mouth is open in protest, and his soft flowing longer hair sticks to his sweaty face, a strand going into his mouth. In other words, the image is unequivocally sexual, and may even be deemed too risqué for a manga published in a *shōnen* magazine. Of course, the scene cuts off at this titillating point. Lower panel is Yakumo jumping up as he is too excited by his own imagination. Turning the page, the drama is resolved with some plastic violence, as Izumo slams the table onto his father's head (Hirakawa 2013: 124).

While the earlier volumes depend more on visual cues familiar to the male reader, focusing on Izumo's cute face and costumes recognisable as a reference to *lolicon* and *moe* aesthetics (Hirakawa 2011: v. 3, 28-29), gradually the author adds and elaborates on the tropes from *boys' love* and *shōjo* genres, "teaching" the reader to recognise the reference, and explore the parodic potential further. This way, the *shōnen*-like violent resolutions to the *boys' love* jokes are maintained throughout, reinforcing the parodic formula. As with the *shōjo*-manga parody-homage sequences, in *moe*-joke episodes the visuals manipulate the reader's perception of the scene until its comical heteronormative resolution. Moreover, it may merge into an actual earnest discussion of LGBTQ, same-sex love, and other complex topics. The parody paves way for an earnest conversation. The parodying of tropes facilitates their recognisability and allows for the homage-like sequences to be comprehensible. Clearly, *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* offers a lot to the female reader, who is in on the joke as well. Simultaneously, the manga teaches its core audience to read female genre tropes and redefines the

masculine genres and masculine contents. The multimodal potential of parody to reveal the inconsistency between signifier and the signified, is clearly exploited to the maximum. It is present on the level of conflict between textual signs and pictorial signs, and is extended onto the juxtaposition of parodic and direct meaning of the parodied generic tropes.

Parodic elements of *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* demonstrate the rising level of female trope awareness of the reader and the growth of this demand. However, the understated elements of *shōjo* manga, which are cited in episodes where they retain the function similar to their role in *shōjo* narrative, push the boundaries of critical potential of *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō*. A crucial aspect of the narrative, the on-stage emotional showdowns between the cast of characters with complex and frequently queer personalities that is mediated through Izumo's *onnagata* skill.

Izumo's conflicted personality gradually develops from innocent, misogynist, anxious boy to a person who accepts all facets of gender and adopts a variety of gender-queer behaviours consciously. He ponders the role of his art, and being an object, as he discusses it with *onnagata*-mentor in volume 17 (Hirakawa, 2014: vol. 17, pp. 106-107). Izumo asks if his mentor also falls in love on stage with his co-actors. To which the man replies that it is not uncommon and necessary onstage. Although he takes a jab at another actor — Sae, who cannot separate Izumo's acting from real life Izumo. In the same volume this topic comes up again, as Izumo gradually learns to accept Sae's misguided, yet earnest love for him, and even sees a possibility of eventually responding to Sae's feelings.

All instances of gender and sexuality that this title brings up add to Izumo's definition of being a man and being an *onnagata*. A vivid meta-example of this self-awareness is when Izumo discusses with his fellow actors (and Sae) same-sex love portrayed in *Somemoyō chūgi no goshūin* — a play they perform in volume 13 (Hirakawa, 2013: vol. 13, pp. 120-129). Responding to the question of what he thinks about *shūdo*, Izumo replies that he cannot understand the actual falling in love with another man. However, he can identify with the way two characters have a deeper bond of obligation and risk their own lives for each other. He finds that very "manly" and very "cool" (Hirakawa, 2013: vol. 13, pp. 122-123).

Kunisaki Izumo no jijō explicitly questions gender, social roles of masculine and feminine and definition of agency. It has *bishōnen* characters, who learn the value of

genderfluidity and gain their agencies through relinquishing the phallic paradigm of superiority and competitiveness as loci of agency.

Conclusion

To sum up, eventually, what separates *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* from female genre? I suggest, it is safe to say that one of the main differences is the name of the magazine in which the series was published. While I cannot claim if it was particularly popular with the male readers, as we already know, roughly half of the readers of shōnen do not identify as male. I suggest it is a very good example of male readers being introduced to the citations of female manga tropes.

The structure of Izumo agency is multimodal, it is inclusive of classic components of *bishōnen*, however the emphasised centrality of Izumo's sexed body and masculine personality skilfully mediates readers' possible anxiety towards gender-queer themes. Multiple points of references, from *bishōnen* and *shōjo* to *shōnen* and action provide different points of engagement for the reader. Is it read as *shōnen* manga about kabuki, a *shōjo*-manga parody, or is it read as homage to *shōjo* manga?

Eventually, one may wonder if *Kunisaki Izumo no jijō* in fact is not first and foremost a parody of *shōnen* manga, and gendered genre as an outdated relic of patriarchal hegemony that birthed them. It takes the genre "*shōnen*" and fills it with *shōjo* tropes, that it allegedly parodies. It ridicules the binary that is still perpetuated through the physical division of genres by publication sites. It revels in the hybridity of recent genres as well as celebrates the hybridity of the readership. It offers all these multiple interpretations, layered non-discriminately, and offers to play with gender by consuming these "gendered genres".

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