

## Visually Persuasive Enculturation:

### An Analysis of gender roles in Shōjo and Shōnen Manga

Although the form is still targeted largely at the Japanese market, the growth of manga, both as industry and as a cultural presence, in the United States has been phenomenal in the last decade. Little research truly accounts for its growing popularity even as sales of single volumes of *Naruto*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *One Piece* sell over a million copies and yearly sales of these series are over 5 million (Loo 1). The assimilation of manga, and its counterpart anime, within American society raises several significant questions that we need to address. While learning how and why manga has become such a strong medium would certainly prove useful, since book sales overall continue to slide, a far more pressing question in my mind is whether the assimilation has remained one-sided. While manga is being Americanized, is there the potential for younger generations of Americans become more culturally Japanese? After all, literature is a purveyor of culture and ideology, particularly in regard to gender roles and sexual identity. The Japanese have a significantly different conception of sexuality than the United States. To cite one example, consider the Festival of the Steel Phallus (かなまら祭り), which is held each spring at the Kanayama Shrine in Kawasaki, Japan, and venerates the breaking of the teeth of a demon's vagina dentata. While this is certainly an extreme example of cultural difference, it does prove my point. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to offer an abbreviated, gender-focused reading of selected works from two of the more prolific and popular writers of the manga, Yuu Watase and Ken Akamatsu, in order to emphasize why addressing this question is so imperative.

For those who are unaware of this form of fiction, the literal meaning of Manga (マンガ) is "humorous picture" and the genre originates in simple caricatures and images similar to the precursors of modern comics in the United States (Masami 13). As the age of manga's readership has expanded from children to adults over the decades, manga has developed into a much more

intricate art form than its American sibling in an effort to depict increasingly complex social themes in a cohesive graphic narrative (Masami 13). While narratives by Bill Willington and Neil Gaiman, along with webcomics by Howard Tayler and Phil and Kaja Foglio, have expanded the definition of comics in America, the majority of Western comics still take the form of comic strips or the iterative regurgitation of superhero tales created in the early part of the twentieth century. Japanese manga is simply a more developed form of fiction and, much like other contemporary forms, it can be separated into various genres.

However, Japanese manga is not strictly classified by the content of the work. The two major categories, Shōnen (少年) and Shōjo (少女) respectively, are divided based on the intended audience with subject matter as a secondary consideration. Shōnen, a Japanese word literally meaning “little years”, refers to any comics aimed at young males approximately 8-18 years-old. Likewise, Shōjo, literally translated “young woman,” designates any comic written for females between elementary and high school age. To say that the texts are gendered is not a metaphorical or hypothetical distinction, but a concrete reality. There are then two genre forms in Japanese manga for each one we have here. For instance, there is Shōnen fantasy and Shōjo fantasy. While they obviously share certain characteristics such as magic, mythological animals, and medieval setting, the usage of such elements is determined by gendered aesthetics and literary conventions.

To give you a better understanding of this gendering of genre, let us turn to the two series I will discuss today. The first is Ken Akamatsu’s series *Negima!: Magister Negi Magi*, which is an exemplary representation of Shōnen manga and currently stands at twenty-one volumes. *Negima!* is a fantasy-based narrative revolving around a ten-year-old boy by the name of Negi Springfield who is a young, but powerful, magician fighting against paranormal evil in contemporary society. Such a narrative premise is not, in and of itself, unique given the genre of

fantasy. J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has a similar premise for example. Nevertheless, one should consider the fact he is a teacher, not a student – the sole child-teacher on staff – and he is in charge of a class comprised entirely of fourteen-year-old girls who function more as a polyamorous group vying for Negi's romantic attention than an educational class.

In contrast, Yuu Watase's *Fushigi Yugi: Genbu Kaiden*, the prequel to her long running *Fushigi Yugi* series, is a good model of Shōjo manga. Standing at eight volumes currently, the narrative's main protagonist is Takiko Okuda – a seventeen-year-old, strong-willed schoolgirl in the later part of the Taishō Period (1912-1926), during Japan's emergence as a colonial power. Takiko, angry with her father for ignoring her mother as she died of tuberculosis, attempts to destroy the book he has been translating from Chinese, entitled "The Universe of Four Gods," and is inadvertently pulled into the story. Takiko becomes the Priestess of Genbu, whose task is to find the seven male Celestial Warriors and restore peace and harmony to the universe by sacrificing her life and happiness. Throughout the series she is often a focus of strong sexual and Oedipal desires as she attempting to stave off those who would manipulate her for their own designs and marry the man she loves.

While these summaries obviously do not do justices to the dramatic complexity of either work, you can clearly see the inherent sexual framework that supports the action in both series. Literature and sex are both political. When combined for a singular purpose, they become a persuasively powerful force, ideologically speaking, because of their rhetorical quality. As Sarah Spence notes "all rhetoric is concerned ultimately with defining the values of a given culture" and, as a system, rhetoric "both establishes and articulates the ideals of a culture" (1-2). Manga is all the more persuasively powerful because, as Roland Barthes explains, such texts present "a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic-message" and, thus, operate on three levels of persuasion in conveying their given message (154). Images act as symbols,

they are iconographic, and promote a duality in meaning as both a pictorial portrayal of reality and a symbol of what reality should be (Arnheim 139). Of course, no image is more powerful than the human body. So, let us examine its depiction in these works more closely.

The body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which hierarchies and metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and reinforced through concrete representation (Bordo 2362). It is not surprising then that nudity in Japanese manga and anime is actually quite common, although depictions are not always inherently sexual (Drazen 53). Baths, showers, and onsen (温泉), or hot spring scenes, are a convention of the form and often serve as moments of contemplation and reflection for the characters. Such scenes allow the extraneous trappings of society, particularly clothing as a symbolic representation of class, gender, and rank, to be stripped away – an important allowance given Japan's rigidly hierarchical society. While such scenes are generally platonic in nature, they are often sexualized as a form of fan service to excite and appeal to the gendered audience. They are designed to be erotic.

Erotic display of the human body, which is the chief concern today, brings the body to the fore, not only in terms of sexuality but also in qualifying assumed gender constructions (Napier 64). Obviously, direct examination of such sexualized images cannot be unaccompanied since the iconic and the linguistic do not operate as individually isolated messengers, but function in a complementary relationship (Barthes 157). The narrative dialogue in manga functions not simply by elucidating the iconic, but by advancing the meanings already grafted onto the icon (Barthes 157). Within and around erotic scenes the linguistic and the iconic operate in symbiosis to create and magnify the construction of gender identity at the individual level of the reader and the public level of society's expectations within the narrative frame (Napier 50).

In *Negima!*, there are several places where sexually explicit images are integrated into the denser narrative arcs. Looking at Volume 3, in which the plot revolves around confrontations

between Negi and the vampiric Evangeline, the erotic imagery is quickly noticeable. The first chapter ends with Negi rescuing one of his endangered students, Nodoka Miyazaki, from a magical explosion. Miyazaki is rendered prostrate in his arms completely nude with the exception of her collar and tie (Akamatsu 29). After his first engagement with Evangeline, his students try and cheer Negi up by seducing him into a bath and ministering to his needs in Chapter 18. The young women are then illustrated losing all their clothes and falling over themselves helplessly in a panicked attempt to escape from Negi's sexually voracious weasel named Albert (Akamatsu 54). Later within the same volume in Chapter 21, one of Negi's other students, Kaede Nagase, coerces him to take an improvised bath in a oil drum after which she promptly strips and joins him. Although Negi is contemplating his own inadequacies as a teacher, his determined male gaze is clearly taking pleasure in Nagase's bare body and breasts – a view which Nagase further encourages through her actions (Akamatsu 112).

Such continued and varied sexual imagery stands in stark contrast to the presentation of the protagonist as pre-pubescent. Although Negi is hardly androgynous, he is not exactly the definition of masculinity. Negi is a short, relatively lanky character with glasses whose only strength lies in his magical abilities. Interestingly, even though he is physically undeveloped, he is quite sexually aware. From his flustered expressions while protecting naked Miyazaki to his comment in the bath with Nagase: "I...have to admit...I'm impressed. For a third-year junior high student, you have a remarkable...chest" (Akamatsu 101). Or even later in Chapter 22, as Negi is tending to a now sick Evangeline, he casually remarks, "Wow! That underwear is really something. It doesn't really suit her image" (Akamatsu 116). His awareness of sexuality and his desires are plainly seen to the reader even if they are not always acknowledged by Negi himself. Of course, the inconsistency in the mental and physical development of the protagonist, can easily be explained. The structure of Shōnen manga, particularly Ken Akamatsu's *Negima!*, is

built around a main controlling figure that closely mimics Freud's concept of the ego-ideal. This allows male readers to identify completely with the protagonist (Mulvey 591). Negi functions as manga surrogate for the male reader.

Looking more closely at the gender dynamics at play between these erotic images and the text in Ken Akamatsu's work, we see two complimentary messages: Negi as defender against evil women, in this case Evangeline, and Negi as protector of good women, chiefly his students. The only thing that demarcates the division between good and evil femininity is a female's relation to Negi. Negi is only capable of defeating Evangeline with the help of his "good" feminine partner, Asuna, who is "contractually" bound to Negi through a "probationary contract" sealed with a kiss (Akamatsu 174). This contract gives Asuna greater magical power while simultaneously reducing her to a semi-autonomous marionette controlled by Negi (Akamatsu 85). As a contractually bound puppet, Asuna is "good." In contrast, Evangeline is "evil" because she hates Negi and resents his father, the "man of a thousand spells," for imprisoning her, a fully-grown woman, in a state of perpetual childhood as a punishment (Akamatsu 133). Evangeline's desperate resistance against the artificial power structures oppressing her—made manifest in her repeated attacks against Negi as the embodiment of the hierarchy that has reduced her to powerlessness—demarcates her unequivocally as evil. Of course, Evangeline is doomed to failure. During the final battle she is not only overpowered, but Negi actually saves her from falling to her demise because she is powerless and, thus, no longer a threat.

The image of the woman as castrator and castrated is represented repeatedly in the mythology of all patriarchal cultures and Ken Akamatsu's *Negima!* is no exception (Creed 116). The women within the story are either tamed, domesticated, and passive, like Asuna, or else savage, destructive, and aggressive like Evangeline (Creed 116). However, the representation in *Negima!* is much more persuasive and extreme. The magical and fantastical structure of the

narrative obscures the underlying patriarchal reinforcement of male power and the near total objectification of females. The narrative literally revolves around the absolute removal of female autonomy—Asuna needs to be a puppet—and criticizes all forms of feminine resistance—Evangeline has no “right” to be angry and ultimately “deserves” it. In addition, *Negima!* encourages a unique valuation of women as objects of sexual desire based solely on their loyalty, compliance, and use value to the males. All the girls in the manga, including Asuna and Evangeline, are only eroticized for the combined gaze of the male reader and the male protagonist in the story when they are useful and submissive to Negi. Limited resistance against patriarchal biases within the text combined with no external resistance, because the manga resides solely in the domain of male readership, makes Shōnen manga such as *Negima!* much more persuasive because it operates without censure.

When comparing this presentation of nudity in the early volumes of *Negima!* to the first volume of Yuu Watase’s *Fushigi Yugi: Genbu Kaiden*, there is already a noticeable difference, particularly in regard to the age and power of the young women displayed. The protagonist, Takiko, is much older than the junior high girls in *Negima!* and she is the only woman portrayed erotically. Moreover, she is also the one that usually initiates intimate contact as is the case with the first Celestial Warrior, Uruki, when she willingly sheds her clothes of her own volition in order lay with him and cool his fever soon after they meet (Watase 98). Furthermore, compared with to the typically heterosexual interactions found in *Negima!*, Watase’s erotic imagery depicts more ambiguous and varied sexual relations. For instance, Uruki has a Chinese character for “woman” tattoo on his chest and has the ability to morph into a woman at will. Watase depicts Takiko laying with both Uruki’s female and male form alternatively as well (Watase 96). Nevertheless, Takiko is often in a passive and vulnerable position when nude, much like the characters in Akamatsu’s work. This can be seen in the same scene with Uruki, where Takiko is

prostrate grasping a blanket in fright at his transformation, before willingly being pulled by him onto the bed again. Interestingly, while Watase feels no compunction about depicting female nudity, at no point does she illustrate the nude male form. This omission is striking given the fact that she does depict Uruku nude in his female form on more than one occasion.

Regardless, when comparing gender relations in *Fushigi Yugi: Genbu Kaiden* to those in *Negima!*, Watase seems to provide us with an interesting tale of quasi-feminine empowerment at first, despite images of sexual passivity on the part of its heroine. Takiko is initially portrayed as a strong fighter, who is “good with the naginata,” and has a powerful personality outside the typical passive norm of the women she encounters (Watase 13). In addition, she clearly stands up to her father, as the representation of patriarchy, by stealing his translation of the “Universe of Four Gods” and attempting to destroy it at the beginning of the series. Moreover, when she rescues Uruki, he is shocked both at Takiko’s decision to stay and fight as well as her prowess in battle. Even as the Priestess of Genbu, Takiko’s body is depicted as being in touch with intense, even magical, forces capable of overwhelming male-dominated reality (Napier 71). Within the narrative, she is the driving force, a self-reliant woman who is willing to protect and defend what she values.

However, the potential for female power is deeply undercut in almost every scene. For instance, in taking care of Uruki, she is refigured into a sacrificial victim, shedding her clothes to cool his fever in the name of duty (Napier 71). Her choice is reconfigured into an obligation rather than a personal choice. No longer a powerful figure in her own right, she functions solely as the means to male survival and little more. This concept can be extended both to her overall objective to unite the Celestial Warriors, where she is only a means of restoring the universe, and her characterization as a symbolic maternal figure for the Warriors. Moreover, Takiko’s resistance against her father results in her expulsion from “reality” into the alternate “Universe of



the Four Gods” (Watase 51). She is actively punished for going against the family, which is the chief contributor to the socialization of the young into patriarchal ideology (Millet 346). In a culture that clearly supports masculine authority, Takiko is marked just as deviant as Evangeline and will be punished, but more severely. As a priestess, she is a living sacrifice. In summoning Genbu, her life will be consumed. To add to her punishment, she also contracts tuberculosis like her mother. Her only real choice throughout the narrative is how she will die and for which man.

Even Uruki’s frequent transformation sequences are also undermined for their “deviant” sexual content. Uruki is only female by male choice and only depicted as female when in a vulnerable position or unconscious as with fever. However, every time he speaks he is instantly transformed into his male counterpart as an active subject and observer of Takiko. Thus, Uruki’s changing gender is not a threatening destabilization of social boundaries, but only a temporary disturbance, instantly rectified (Napier 50). And Takiko, like all representative women portrayed in patriarchy, exists in a traditional exhibitionist role as simultaneously looked at and displayed, with her appearance coded for strong erotic and ideological impact on the reader (Mulvey 589). What at first appears to be a message of female empowerment instead ends up presenting a decidedly regressive and voyeuristic construct that teaches women to identify with the male point of view and to accept, as normal and legitimate, the male system of values (Fetterly 567). As portrayed in *Fushigi Yugi: Genbu Kaiden*, this system values female agency, not autonomy, when it directly promotes male power and strongly inculcates female readers with the belief that the ideal woman, like Takiko, must continually sacrifice for male companions and family—must be a sacrificial lamb slaughtered for the good of the men around her. Even more problematic, she is only attractive and worthy of adoration because of her compliance.

With the segregation of the sexes during childhood, and defining the contexts and nature of their encounters later on, Japanese society defines gender roles with adamant rules (Napier

48). As illustrated here, the strict roles encapsulating male and female are still enforced within manga and they have a decidedly persuasive impact. Adolescence is the period of the greatest discord between body image and lived body, between its immutable idealized self-image and bodily changes (Grosz 75). At this particularly transformative point, these “simple” fantasies of manga are forcibly asserting Japanese cultural identities that are overtly on-sided toward male dominance and female submission. While it is by no means unique in reinforcing patriarchal rule, and its hierarchical structure, Japanese manga is more targeted because of the gender segregation of the genres. Moreover, it is considered with relative indifference because of the unique status of graphic novels in this country as “light” literature when it is a far more persuasive medium. This naivety about the nature of the medium and its content could have far reaching consequences—consequences we are not considering or fully examining—particularly in regard to its influence in gender politics in this country.



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