



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Anan, Nobuko (2014) The Rose of Versailles: Women and Revolution in Girls' Manga and the Socialist Movement in Japan. *Journal of Popular Culture* 47 (1), pp. 41-63. ISSN 0022-3840.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12324/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Nobuko ANAN

The Rose of Versailles: Women and Revolution in Girls' Manga and the Socialist Movement in Japan

I. Introduction

The consumer society with the unprecedented magnitude of the 1970s brought what critic Ōtsuka Eijiⁱ calls “the big bang of girls’ culture” in Japan, and this contributed to the expansion of the market of girls’ manga (comic books) (*Shōjo minzoku gaku* 49, 53).ⁱⁱ Girls’ manga, particularly those by so-called “24 nen gumi” (“The Year 24 Group,” a group of women manga artists born around the 24th year of the reign of the Shōwa Emperor, or A.D. 1949) became a site for women to collectively and critically explore their bodies, gender, and sexuality (Ōtsuka *Kanojo tachi no reigō seikigun* 221-223). *Berusaifu no bara* (The Rose of Versailles), authored by female manga writer Ikeda Riyokoⁱⁱⁱ and serialized in a girls’ manga magazine from April 1972 to December 1973, is remembered as one of the icons of Japan’s manga history. It is set in the time of the French Revolution and revolves around two women, Marie Antoinette and a fictional character, Oscar François de Jarjayes. Oscar, a female soldier in the Royal Guards, served as Marie’s bodyguard, but eventually participates in overthrowing the monarchy in the French Revolution.

One of the reasons that this manga has achieved an iconic status is the fact that it brought historical narrative into girls’ manga. However, what is more significant is that it provided girls and women with a stage to experience the life of a revolutionary androgyne who fights to overthrow the ancient, powerful regime of gender and sexuality. The period when this manga was serialized saw the development of the women’s liberation movement in Japan, and activists

were women marginalized in the new left movement like their counterparts in other parts of the world. The new left movement in Japan was over with the Asama-sansō Incident in February 1972, in which five male members of the armed United Red Army (URA) were arrested for occupying a mountain lodge (Asama-sansō) on their flight from the police. However, women activists continued to voice their demand for social equality, particularly that of gender and sex. After the Asama-sansō Incident, the police discovered that URA members had murdered twelve of their comrades because of what they saw as their ideological weakness, and this swept away some remaining sympathy in society with URA's resistance to state authority (Igarashi 120). The new left's dream of the revolution died in the carnage, but women did not give up their vision of a socialist revolution. The revolution achieved in *The Rose of Versailles* was the revolution which these liberationists were struggling for.

This manga also epitomizes the tension among women activists between the socialist consciousness and the pursuit of personal pleasure provided by consumerism in the time marked by the shift from the "season of politics" to the consumerist society. The Asama-sansō Incident, which slightly preceded the serialization of this manga, also reflected this shift. The police stormed the lodge after the fierce battle with the URA, and this was televised live, with the audience rating at 89.2 percent (Kunō, cited in Igarashi 119). By the end of the 1960s, ninety percent of households in Japan owned TV sets (Oda, cited in Igarashi 121), a symbol of consumerism which was the new left's ideological enemy. Ironically, the URA's defeat was presented to the viewers as a consumable image. Oscar's revolution in *The Rose of Versailles* was after all only possible in this new social climate. Indeed, popularity of this manga, serialized in a mass-market magazine, led to its reproduction in other media. For example, the theatrical adaptations of the manga by all-female musical/revue company Takarazuka kagekidan (The

Takarazuka Revue) from 1974 to 1976 broke all audience records up to that point and a film adaptation by Jacques Demy in 1979 was promoted with a TV commercial of Shiseidō's red lipstick worn by starring actress Catriona McColl.^{iv} In the space surrounding *The Rose of Versailles* charged with contradictory desires, girls and women activists met.

II. Revolutionary Bodies of Women

The story of *The Rose of Versailles* weaves together historical facts and fictions. Oscar is brought up as a successor to her father, General de Jarjayes, because he has no male child. Although she is open about the fact that she is a woman, she wears male attire and serves Marie as a commander of the Royal Guards. However, Oscar starts to be aware of the social inequality in the political upheaval leading to the revolution. She resigns from the Royal Guards and joins the French Guards as an officer. Eventually, she participates in storming the Bastille with the anti-royalist soldiers of her regiment and helps those in the Third Estate who do not know how to handle weapons. However, she is shot and dies after witnessing the fall of the Bastille. *The Rose of Versailles* ends with Marie Antoinette guillotined.

These two women are characterized in diametrically opposite ways. Marie appears as a girl but soon becomes a mother of three children and the mother of France symbolically, while Oscar is a woman soldier who eventually helps to destroy the ancient regime. Sexuality was one of the main foci in the women's liberation movement in Japan, and the activists attempted to intervene in the state's reproductive control as the legacy of prewar, imperialist Japan (Mackie 164-166). Likewise, sexuality in relation to motherhood was one of the main concerns of girls' manga in the 1970s. However, in girls' manga, there was a conflict between the idea that the status quo must be accepted and the view that it should be rejected (Ōtsuka *Kanojotachi* 85). *The Rose of Versailles* reflects such tension, albeit in more sync with the liberationists' resistant

politics. Marie's love for her children is presented as respectable, but other than this, she is depicted as an unwise woman. She has no concern for those outside of her small world. All she does is to idle away her time by wasting the national expenditure on luxuries and thinking of her love, Hans Axel von Fersen (even though she feels guilty about her affair). While Mother Marie is not always an ideal character, Oscar is. She is intelligent and keenly aware of social issues. She becomes more and more critical to the excessively dissipated life-style of the aristocrats and the unfair tax system, which exempts priests and aristocrats.

Such contrast between Marie and Oscar may seem to be based on the classical gender binary. Oscar's social awareness may seem possible because she is granted access to the male sphere, which is, according to her, broader and more meaningful, compared to the female sphere represented by cosmetics, beautiful dresses, and children (*Berusaifu no bara* vol 3^v 359-361). However, regardless of what she says, her critical acuteness does not necessarily come from her privileged, "male" status. In fact, no aristocrat man around her shares these thoughts.

The Rose of Versailles indeed entails a possibility of transcending a clear gender division, and the most conspicuous marker of this is Oscar's graphic image. She is presented not so much masculine as androgynous, and it is manga's graphic convention that makes this possible. Manga has realistic graphics of scenery and props, but its graphic images of people are not realistic and function clearly as signs. For example, the shape and the size of eyes signify characters' sex and age; girls' eyes are rounder while boys' tend to be oval, and younger characters' eyes are bigger than older ones'. A laughing mouth is suggested by an up-side-down triangle, and embarrassment is expressed by some tilted lines on the cheeks. Such unrealistic ways of representing human bodies make the visualization of androgyne possible. Except for her feminine long hair, Oscar's graphic image stands between those of typical male characters' and

female characters'. She is taller than other females but shorter than males, and her eyebrows are thicker than females' but thinner than males'. Therefore, she looks more masculine when contrasted to female characters and more feminine when contrasted to male ones (Oshiyama 167). The depiction of her gender and sex are thus not fixed. In this regard, she is free from bodily constraints. Such a character can appear real, not realistic, in the two-dimensional sphere of manga. **[Fig. 1]**

The contrast between Marie and Oscar is then the one between a mother charged with physicality and an androgyne without physicality. Of course, the graphic images of female characters in manga are also not realistic. As graphic images, manga characters ultimately do not have physicality. The point is that the unique graphic convention of manga can give realness to the androgyne, who does not exist in the reality. Denial of physicality is an important characteristic of what might be called Japanese "girls' aesthetics." As I have discussed elsewhere drawing from works by Honda Masuko, Kawamura Kunimitsu, and Ōtsuka Eiji, girls' aesthetics rejects women's material bodies defined as reproductive organs and romanticizes "unproductive," fictional bodies as a way to counter the patriarchal social order.^{vi} Interestingly, the rejection of body is also a tenet of many new left organizations, but in a different way from girls' aesthetics. As their protests became more violent, activists were required to train their bodies to the extent of "corporeal privation" (Igarashi 123). For example, the members of the URA confined themselves to mountain bases, where they trained themselves to become better revolutionary soldiers. As Yoshikuni Igarashi argues, the URA believed that "[b]odies merely belonged to the conditions that must be overcome in order to reach the higher goal of revolution" (129). Bodily comfort was considered to hamper such a revolutionary cause and hence was determined as "bourgeois pleasure" (Igarashi 129). This was often stereotypically associated

with materiality/femininity, as the group's murder cases suggest; a few female members were executed, because they cared about fashion. Thus, both the new left and girls' aesthetics are preoccupied with non-physicality, but while the former associates women's bodies with materiality and rejects them as inferior entities to be overcome, the latter challenges such association itself. Unlike girls' aesthetics, the liberationists valorized female material bodies hitherto repressed in the leftist movement, but at the root of girls' aesthetics and the women's lib was the challenge to the gender and sexual inequality including the myth of motherhood.

Girls' aesthetics originates in the modern period when the school system developed along with capitalism. Girls from wealthy families were sent to girls' schools, where they were trained (or invested) as future "good wife, wise mother," with their virginity "protected" from the outside world until they graduated and got married. Under the state-sanctioned ideology of "good wife, wise mother," women were expected to give birth to and nurture the future Japanese (male) citizens, who could work for the imperialist project. However, the girls developed their own aesthetics resistant to such regulation of women's bodies by taking advantage of the confinement.

As in the case of their postwar successors, what made this resistance possible was girls' status as consumers. Capitalism enclosed them in schools, but it also opened up a space for their internal rebellion. Barbara Sato suggests that the consumerism in early twentieth-century Japan brought empowerment at least to middle-class women even including housewives who were seen negatively by girls; as the decision-making agent, these women actively constructed new images of themselves and demanded that their voices be reflected in a broader social context opened to them by the mass media (16-19). Female students also experienced the empowerment as consumers. Targeting them, magazines started to be published in the 1900s. They officially upheld the educational policy for future "good wives, wise mothers," but the readers used them

as sites where they created the exclusive imagined community of those who enjoyed writing and reading stories and poems fantasizing female same-sex erotics and eternally young, beautiful, “unproductive” bodies decorated with ribbons and frills. In their communication through readers’ columns, they used fictional names, evoking beautiful images such as those of flowers. Thus, in the network developed through these magazines, the girls performed fictional selves without physicality, floating outside of the teleological modern time. In the postwar period, girls’ aesthetics continued in the surviving and newly-inaugurated girls’ magazines, but they were taken over by manga magazines in the 1950s when the visual media became the center of the entertainment (Yonezawa 54-55). After the “the big bang of girls’ culture” in the 1970s, girls’ aesthetics found a place in girls’ manga, and it became more accessible to the lower-class female youth.^{vii}

Importantly, the fact that girls’ aesthetics is still found in the contemporary period suggests that the modern construction of Japanese womanhood still haunts Japanese society. It is true that the Occupation by the Allied Powers in the immediate postwar period (1945-1952) brought significant changes in the status of Japanese women. For instance, they acquired suffrage in 1945, and thirty-nine women became Diet members in 1946. However, these changes did not mean that the women were completely liberated from the modern gender and sexual ideology. The state’s intervention in women’s reproductive rights has been ongoing since the 1890s by taking various legal forms under the pretext of protecting mothers’ bodies (Mackie 164-165, 192-193).

From the perspective of girls’ aesthetics, in *The Rose of Versailles*, it is Marie who is confined to a small world and decorated with ribbons and frills, but it is Oscar who incites same-sex eroticism and freedom from physicality. Oscar is indeed a fictional character as opposed to

the historical, real-life figure Marie Antoinette. Girls' aesthetics is thus differently enacted by these two characters, but the readers' letters to the magazine suggest that it was Oscar who was the target of their erotic sentiments. She was also the object of identification for those who saw themselves unfit for the traditional female role (Oshiyama 211-214). One reason why the readers did not care about Marie is because she does not try to turn the confined, surveilled space into that of resistance. She simply shifted to Mother as demanded by the royalists. On the other hand, Oscar represents disobedience. She has the strength to change the preassigned space into that of freedom. Originally, it is her father who trained her as a soldier, but when he orders her to resign from the Royal Guard to get married for her safety in the political upheaval, she defies the order and chooses to remain a soldier. In the end, she uses the skills and knowledge she acquired as a soldier for the purpose of overthrowing the ancient regime.

At the same time, however, Oscar's life may seem to go beyond the scope of girls' aesthetics. While she manipulates the given space for her own advantage, she also tries to break open that space and move into a new world by becoming a part of the force to create a new history. The resistance in girls' aesthetics takes a form of remaining unchanged within. The girls reject adulthood-cum-mother/wifehood by imagining the nullification of the modern historical consciousness typified by the teleological progression of time. However, importantly, Oscar dies in the battle. She does not live to see a new age after the revolution. Although she is actually thirty-four years old when she dies, her graphic image does not exhibit signs of her age. She looks young and so she dies young. Dying young without becoming mother is one of the fantasies of girls' aesthetics, as it is the intervention in the modern, heteronormative, and patriarchal economy.

Indeed, as touched on above, *The Rose of Versailles* abounds in homoeroticism, even though there is technically no homosexual relationship in this manga. Female characters often express erotic sentiments to Oscar. Rosalie, a servant girl of de Jarjayes family, is suffering from unrequited love toward Oscar. Moreover, an aristocrat girl who is in love with Oscar commits suicide in order to resist a marriage of convenience. Also importantly, Oscar's romantic relationship with André looks male homosexual. It also looks lesbian because he is not stereotypically masculine enough. Graphically, André has more feminine, rounder eyes, unlike other male characters' masculine oval-shaped eyes (Oshiyama 197). He is thus to some extent androgynous like Oscar. In addition, he is a commoner and a servant of de Jarjayes family, and therefore, he is socially in a weaker position than Oscar. He cannot marry her because of the class difference, so he does not turn her into wife and mother. She treats him as her equal, but he is portrayed as the one who knows his place.

The sex scene of Oscar and André particularly exudes homoeroticism. *The Rose of Versailles* is one of the first girls' manga which featured a sex scene (Fujimoto 66), but the depiction of entirely naked bodies was avoided. This in turn contributes to the graphic images which obscure biological bodies of Oscar and André, especially that of Oscar. What is presented in a romantic mood is them holding each other in the bed, only exposing their upper bodies but not Oscar's breasts. They look like a male or/and female couple. Eroticism in the scene rejects the conventionally gendered and sexualized gaze. Honda points out that in the girls' novels of Yoshiya Nobuko, a lesbian writer who worked from the modern period to the early 1970s, characters' lower bodies are obscured, while their facial areas are delineated in great details. She relates this to girls' rejection of the identification with vagina-cum-motherhood (*Ibunka to shite no kodomo* 191-193). The sex scene of Oscar and André has the same effect. Even though they

have sex, this act is “unproductive.” What emphasizes such unproductiveness in addition to their graphic images is that Oscar suggests to André that they have sex for the first time the night before they leave for the Bastille. She is aware that they may die in the event, and therefore, there is almost no possibility that their sex leads to her childbirth. Thus, their homoerotic sex is an expression of ultimately pure love that is seemingly contradictorily possible only outside of the physical realm.^{viii} **[Fig. 2]**

Another important issue about the couple’s homoerotic relationship is that it is similar to the romantic, homosexual relationships depicted in a genre of girls’ manga categorized as “boys’ love” manga (abbreviated as BL manga) for teenage and adult female readers. BL manga originated in the early 1970s^{ix} but was established as a genre in the 1990s. BL does not replicate actual homosexual relationships, and couples are more like stereotypically heterosexual ones, if one of the couple is replaced with a woman. There is a fixed role in their partnerships as well as in their sexual interactions. The ones on top are taller, physically stronger, more assertive, etc., and the ones at bottom possess the opposite traits. However, while there is a graphic difference between the tops and the bottoms, both still look androgynous. This lets the readers/viewers identify themselves with either one in a couple; they can enjoy both active and passive roles as well as various ways of sexuality.^x BL couples do not usually challenge the conventional heteronormative power dynamics, but these couples and Oscar/André are similar in terms of their graphic images which allow viewers/readers multiple forms of sexual identification. For example, Mizoguchi Akiko, a queer studies scholar, states that Oscar and André helped her form her lesbian identity.^{xi} In the 1990s, girls’ manga emerged that dealt with lesbian relationships (Fujimoto 284), but before that, BL was the main genre that openly depicted the same-sex erotics.

The sex scene of Oscar and André had a tremendous impact on the readers. Manga critic Fujimoto Yukari recalls the surprise she experienced when she first read/viewed the scene. She writes that this scene determined the image of sex in the minds of middle and high school female students around the time. Sex was aesthesized—it came to be regarded not as a daily activity but as the ultimate way to convey once-in-lifetime love (Fujimoto 68). However, what seems to be more important is that for this generation of women, homoerotic, bodiless, and “unproductive” sex became the ideal. Interestingly, in 1989 when these girl readers reached their late twenties or early thirties, the birth rate marked 1.57, which was the lowest on record up to that point (Ōtsuka *Kanojotachi* 234). This is not to claim that *The Rose of Versailles* is the reason for this, but it is significant that, as the author Ikeda admits, this manga was consciously produced under the influence of the women’s liberation movement (Ikeda, cited in Oshiyama 209). Liberationists sought for more possibilities of women’s bodies. Likewise, Ikeda attempted to go against the social structure that did not allow women’s autonomy. She writes that she wanted the French Revolution in this manga to be “the inner revolution of the Japanese women” in the age when they could not choose their own lives (*Berusaiyu no bara daijiten* 146). *The Rose of Versailles* was thus one of the inputs that the girls received in the political atmosphere of the time.

The revolution in this manga also reflects the silenced voice of women in the extremist new left. As mentioned, a few women of the URA were executed because of their “bourgeois propensity” of wearing make-up, accessories, etc. As Ōtsuka argues, the urge for revolution and consumerist sentiments coexisted in these women (*Kanojotachi* 21). However, such coexistence was not allowed in the URA, and they were murdered.^{xii} As discussed earlier, consumerism provided girls with space to explore their subjectivity, and this also held for activists of women’s liberation movement. Although they were not entirely supportive of consumerism, they tried to

construct their own worlds with consumable items and images as active agents. They showed attention to their physical comfort and well-being, concern with self-esteem related to appearance, which were satisfied with consumption. Consumerism helped express their identities, hitherto marginalized in the leftist movement. For example, Tanaka Mitsu, the standard bearer of Japan's women's lib, fascinated other women by participating in demonstrations all in black including black high heels, not in typical jeans and sneakers (Oguma 715). Women activists of the extremist new left shared such sensitivities with the liberationists as well as creators and the audience of girls' manga, but their voices were muffled.

Importantly, Ikeda Riyoko shares a similar experience with these women of the URA. She was a philosophy major and was studying Marx and Lenin (Takatori 194). She was also a member of the Democratic Youth League of Japan, which was under Japan Communist Party (Takatori 189). Recalling her days in the League, she complains, "When I attended a meeting in a bright-red suit, they said I was like a bourgeoisie or an aristocrat, and they almost tried to punish me by dismissal from membership" (Takatori 194). However, unlike the executed women of the extremist URA, Ikeda could demonstrate her feminist politics in *The Rose of Versailles*, the stage set by consumerism, as if she heard and took over these women's muffled voices. In addition, Tanaka Mitsu once said, sympathizing with one of the two leaders of the URA Nagata Hiroko, who was arrested before the Asama-sansō Incident: "Nagata Hiroko is myself."^{xiii} Nagata had feminist sensitivities in her pursuit of women's autonomy in the leftist movement (Ōtsuka *Kanojotachi* 16, Oguma vol 2 546), but they were overwhelmed by masculinism of another male leader Mori Tsuneo and the movement itself. She was undoubtedly responsible for the murder cases in the URA, but still, it is telling that she spent her time in prison drawing girls' manga-style illustrations (Ōtsuka *Kanojotachi* 10).^{xiv} It is as if she was trying to tell the women's

experiences, which were not heard in the new leftist movement. *The Rose of Versailles* reflects not only the desire of the girl readers but also the collective voice of the women who could not find their space in the revolution sought after by male activists.

In the space created in and through *The Rose of Versailles*, women experience the pleasure of playing the central role in the revolution. This pleasure gets intensified when Oscar fights and dies as a martyr in the battle at the Bastille. As Alan Forrest notes, the financial crisis caused by the French involvement in the American War of Independence was the trigger of the revolution (13), and this manga explains the process accurately. However, for the readers, such historical facts probably did not matter so much. As pointed out above, Ikeda herself intended the French Revolution here to be the “inner revolution of the Japanese women.”^{xv} She probably borrowed this historical event in France, simply because the West was admired by girls. The imaginary West functioned as girls’ dreamland in which they could leave their real lives behind, and this certainly reflected Japan’s national identity constructed in relation to the (imagined) West since the modern period. Indeed, many girls’ manga are set in Euro-American contexts. In addition, if the West is often imagined as a “site of transvestism” in Japan as Jennifer Robertson notes (76), it is a good setting for a character like Oscar.

Ikeda does not bring body politics into her statement about the revolution, but it is crucial in this manga. The ancient regime here stands for the sexist, heteronormative, and to some extent, class system. The French Revolution is the final stage of Oscar’s independence from the conventional gender, sexual, class paradigms seemingly contradictorily represented by her father who raised her as a man. After the middle phase of the story, Oscar’s conflict with him becomes one of the central issues. General de Jarjayes gets furious when she left the Royal Guards for the French Guards without consulting him. The readers learn for the first time here in his monologue

that the reason he sent her to the Royal Guards was because he thought that even a woman can serve as a soldier there in a safe environment (vol 3 127). He is angry because his monitoring of Oscar's gender transgression failed. In response to her father's anger, Oscar cries out, "I'm not your doll!!" (vol 3 126). Moreover, he finds out that Oscar is reading Rousseau and Voltaire and denounces her as a rebel. To this, she replies, showing her socialist consciousness, "Good books attract people regardless of class difference. It is natural for human beings to desire to read them" (vol 3 124-125). Furthermore, at a party her father held for the purpose of choosing her husband, Oscar appears in military uniform and flirts with female guests. She later declares to her father her decision to live as a "child of Mars" (vol 3 361). At last, when she leaves for Paris to attend the battle at the Bastille, General de Jarjayes accepts her independence, saying in his monologue, "Go your own way. Follow your passion" (vol 4 301). Thus, the French Revolution becomes the site for Oscar to demonstrate her final freedom. As a woman soldier without a material body, she fires cannon to the old gender and sexual system that tries to drag her down to the world which categorizes its inhabitants according to their biological bodies. She also challenges the class system by participating in the battle as one of the citizens.

However, Oscar cannot live in a new world. The revolution sets the stage not only for the demonstration of her independence but also for her heroic death. She fulfills girls' aesthetics by dying young. By analyzing the graphic images of her death, Oshiyama maintains that Oscar's death elevates her to the level of the mythic figure, who transcends the constraint of time (206). Even before her death, her graphic images often evoke the Greek mythology, and according to Oshiyama, this reaches the climax in the scene of her death (205-206). It is typical of girls' manga to graphically depict non-realistic images (of not just characters' bodies as discussed above). A typical example is that flowers are added to the background of characters in order to

enhance the beautiful atmosphere, and it does not suggest that these flowers really exist in the scene. In addition, a character often appears in “disguise”; for example, if a character is thought to be angelically kind by herself/himself, or another character, or the author, that character is visualized as an angel in a certain “frame” even though s/he is technically not an angel. (In manga, square frames function as something like camerawork in films.) Oscar usually appears in uniform, but is portrayed in Greek/Roman-style attire when another character praises her beauty, which is considered by this character to be equivalent to that of the gods in Olympia. Moreover, she is depicted with a Mars-like image when she likens herself to his child (Oshiyama 205). **[Fig 3]** In her death scene, she is accompanied by a figure like a Greek goddess in the background, and Oshiyama writes that this suggests that she has achieved the status equivalent to a mythic figure (206). In other words, by becoming like a god, she is freed from the existing system, which obstructs her autonomy (Oshiyama 207). Oshiyama argues that Oscar’s transgressive gender, and I would add, sexual identity was “sanctified” as the one which will not be threatened regardless of the time change (207). Her argument is persuasive, except on the point that she sees Oscar’s trajectory as the growth of a girl under her father’s control to a full-fledged adult. She associates girlhood with weakness and submissiveness (190). On the contrary, Oscar’s death is a good example of resistance in girls’ aesthetics. To become a mythical figure is an ultimate way to become fictitious without physicality. Moreover, Oscar’s “deification” confines her to an ahistorical space, in which she never grows old and never produces anything.

III. Reactionary Bodies of Women

Nevertheless, Oscar’s fight in the French Revolution is not always subversive. This is because the gesture toward escaping the material body with its gender and sexual constraints transforms the body into an immaterial symbol, one that is available for appropriation by a

variety of ideologies. Abstraction of the materiality of the body is both liberating and potentially entrapping.

One example of negative effect of immateriality in *The Rose of Versailles* is in its treatment of poverty in relation to the admiration of Oscar's status as an aristocrat, against which she is supposed to rise in revolt. This manga has many episodes about poverty, such as the hunger of people in Paris and Rosalie's attempted prostitution to support her family. Oscar sides with these people in the battle at the Bastille and claims herself to be a citizen like them. However, she never lives as a poor commoner after the revolution. Ikeda herself mentions, "Oscar fought with the common people, but she cannot live as a commoner in dirty clothes" (Ikeda, cited in Oshiyama 206-207). She reduces the episodes about poverty to fashion, and this is particularly surprising given that Ikeda was a member of the youth group under the Japan Communist Party. After all, the depiction of poverty as substantial suffering is not the main concern of this manga. Poverty functions as image, and it enhances Oscar's heroic martyrdom. She is a lofty aristocrat who sacrifices her status for the poor. Ironically, this parallels with the naïveté of the new left movement around the time, which was primarily by the elite students who romanticized the working class.

Ikeda's above statement also reveals the dilemma of women's consumerist sentiments. Here is the tension between Ikeda's red suit and the poor's dirty clothes. Consumerism provided her with a space and commodities through/with which she constructed her own identity, but for her, the working class generically remained just as those in dirty clothes. Yet, in her mindset, she was somehow also concerned with social equality. *The Rose of Versailles* exhibits the predicament of women who had the leftist awareness but found a possible tool to make their voice heard in consumerism. Indeed, it was one of the works/events which marked the shift in

the site of political action from class-based street action to lifestyle-based performance, one that derived much potential from the realm of consumption.

In addition to poverty as image, Oscar's status as a soldier is also treated as such. Her activities as a soldier are not really presented in this manga. Even in the scene at the Bastille, the purpose seems to be the depiction of not the battle but her heroic, aestheticized death. As discussed above, Oscar's death empowers girls because it completes her fictionalization. However, the aestheticized image of a soldier's death is at the same time disturbing. It is similar to the masculinist tenet of the extremist factions of the new left, as the activists' devotion was measured by their "willingness to die for the cause" (Igarashi 123). Moreover, the aestheticized image of Oscar's death, together with her deification, reminds us of rightwing tactics. In the case of prewar imperialist Japan, the fundamentalism of *kokutai* (translated as national body or polity) defined the Japanese as the members of the extended Imperial Family sharing the everlasting Japanese cultural essence embodied by the Emperor. In *kokutai*, the Japanese were supposed to be united within the Emperor's spiritual body, and soldiers were doomed to contribute to the expansion of the Japanese Imperial Household. Those who died for the Emperor were deified. The abstract image of the Japanese body did affect the lived bodies; under the ideology of "good wife, wise mother," women were expected to function as reproducers of the Japanese soldiers. Girls resisted "good wife, wife mother" ideology, but unlike liberationists who critiqued the legacy of imperial gender/sexual policies, their critique of ideal womanhood did not reach the origin of this ideal. Rather, girls' aesthetics and nationalist sentiments could coexist in girls, as Honda recalls her girlhood when she saw soldiers off to the battlefields with an Imperial Japan's flag in her hand while she also enjoyed Yoshiya Nobuko's novels at home (*Ibunka* 139). Indeed, while these two worlds are opposite to each other (national sphere and personal sphere), they are

similar in that they were both consisted of idealization, existed in the realm of ideals with its concomitant sense of non-material.

In the postwar period, the word *kokutai* is not officially used any longer, but the ideology survives. Like many other popular media, manga, while providing space for subversive politics, primarily conveys conservative ideologies. Saitō Minako points out the nationalist tendency of anime, and this seems to be applicable to many manga works as well, because these two media share the two-dimensional aesthetics and the audience overlap to a great degree. (*The Rose of Versailles* was actually adapted into anime and broadcast from 1979 to 1980.) As Saitō suggests, anime pieces for boys are usually set in a wartime society where battles with the Others are the central activities of characters (18) and the ones for girls tend to have protagonist girls waiting for Prince Charming with whom they will marry and build families in future (Saitō 32-35).

Of course, some genres of manga such as the one by “The Year 24 Group” do not fit into this generalized pattern, but *The Rose of Versailles* betrays ambivalence. It deconstructs the conventional gender/sexual dichotomy to a great extent but exhibits reactionary sentiments, as demonstrated by representation of Oscar as a patriotic soldier. The uncanny lingering of nationalist sentiments of prewar girls is found here. Oscar often remarks such things as “If something terrible happens to France, I will die with her” (vol 4 191). Her last words are “Viva, France...!” (vol 5 25). As discussed above, the French Revolution in this work should be seen as the stage for Oscar to fight against the conventional gender and sexual construction, and therefore, it might be better to see her soldier status as a metaphor of her will to overthrow the existing social structure. It is also important that she is anti-royalist. However, still, beautiful graphic images of Oscar in military uniform and frequent references to her blond hair and blue eyes could be problematic. Ian Buruma writes that the glorification of Oscar in Takarazuka’s

theatre adaptation reminded him of “Nazi propaganda staged by Leni Riefenstahl” (121). I assume that Ikeda did not even imagine that the representation of Oscar comes close to Nazi propaganda. It is more likely that her and girls’ admiration of the West associated with the Caucasians (stereotypically represented by blond hair and blue eyes in Japan) and her desire to depict a beautiful fighting woman unwittingly resulted in something like Nazi propaganda. However, this does reveal the naiveté of not only Ikeda but also of the Japanese in general. Japanese education does not teach about Nazi propaganda in history classes, even though Japan was allied with Germany during WWII.^{xvi}

As a soldier without a material body, even in the scene of her death, Oscar cannot portray the weight of a dying body. The moment of her death is even decorated by flowers and stars. Her fight and death are romanticized as images. War propaganda also conceals under beautiful images the real suffering of dying bodies in the battlefields. Such an image of a patriotic woman soldier could incite the readers’ minds nationalist sentiments, that is, the idea that even women can die for the country and such sacrifice is beautiful.^{xvii} Oscar as a soldier even reminds one of the predicament of the prewar feminists in Japan. Fighting for the Emperor was the sole means to be counted as a citizen, and therefore, many feminists considered that women, excluded from the conscription, could only be a part of the nation by (re)producing soldiers. Ikeda mentions that *The Rose of Versailles* was influenced by the second-wave feminism, but Oscar’s image as a soldier can be like the visualization of the prewar feminists’ wish for the citizenship granted in exchange for fighting for the nation.

IV. Conclusion

About two months before the Asama-sansō Incident, the criticism against one of the URA women soldiers for her “bourgeois, feminine tendency” started in a mountain base. She tried (in

vain) to evade it by claiming that she joined the army to be a “man-woman” (Igarashi 133). She used this term to deny her femininity, but the term “man-woman” unwittingly seems to challenge the masculinist new left’s take on bodies. She did not let go of a “woman.” More significantly, a “man-woman” or androgyne circumvents the existing gender and sexual binary. It is as if anticipating the emergence of Oscar, a revolutionary woman soldier in girls’ manga. A “man-woman” is as preoccupied with the bodiless realm as the masculinist activists of the new left movement were, but in a different way from them. A “man-woman” is preoccupied with two-dimensionality as a way to reject the traditional, masculinist construction of women’s bodies. A “man-woman” finds such a possibility in consumerism. If the new left’s negation of bodies is the negation of the feminine, a man-woman’s negation of bodies is the negation of the ancient, masculinist regime of gender and sexuality.

Women in different groups in their pursuit of subjectivity meet in *The Rose of Versailles*. The revolution in this manga is charged with the feminist consciousness of these women. It also reflects the multiple, even contradictory desires of these women—rejection of the state-sanctioned, masculinist, and heteronormative womanhood, desire to be counted as citizens by fighting for the nation, desire to construct their own identities in a consumerist society, demand for social equality, and longing for the aristocracy. Oscar swallows all of these. In the eternity she obtained through her death, she lives as an androgyne, an egalitarian, an aristocrat, a patriotic soldier, and a child of Mars.

Works Cited

Anan, Nobuko. “Two-dimensional Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Performance” (forthcoming in T212 *TDR*). Print.

Buruma, Ian. *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture*. London: Jonathan

- Cape, 1984. Print.
- Forrest, Alan. *The French Revolution*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. Print.
- Fujimoto, Yukari. *Watashi no ibasho wa doko ni aruno?: shōjo manga ga utsusu kokoro no katachi*. 1998. Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Shuppan, 2008. Print.
- “Heisei 21 nen seishōnen hakusho.” Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, n.d. Web. 22 July, 2010.
- Honda, Masuko. *Kodomo no ryōya kara*. Tokyo: Jinbun Shoin, 1983. Print.
- . *Ibunka to shite no kodomo*. Tokyo: Kinokuniya shoten, 1982. Print.
- Igarashi, Yoshikuni. “Dead Bodies and Living Guns: The United Red Army and Its Deadly Pursuit of Revolution.” *Japanese Studies* 27:2 (2007): 119-137. Print.
- Ikeda, Riyoko. *Berusaiyu no bara*. 1-5 vols. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1994. Print.
- . *Berusaiyu no bara daijiten*. Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2003. Print.
- Ishida, Minori. *Hisoyaka na kyōiku: “yaoi, bōizu rabu” zenshi*. Kyoto: Rakuho shuppan, 2008. Print.
- Kawamura, Kunimitsu. *Otome noshintai: onna no kindai tosekushuariti*. Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten, 1994. Print.
- Mackie, Vera. *Feminsim in Modern Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- “Midori no hitori goto.” 3 May, 2006. Web. 9 August, 2010.
- Mizoguchi, Akiko. “Akogare no Yōroppa. n.d. Web. 18 July, 2010.
- Nagakubo, Yōko. *Yaoi shōsetsu ron: josei no tame no erosu hyōgen*. Tokyo: Senshū daigaku shuppan, 2005. Print.
- Oguma, Eiji. *1968*. 1-2 vols. Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 2009. Print.
- Oshiyama, Michiko. *Shōjo manga jendaa hyōshō-ron: “Dansō no shōjo” no zōkei to*

- aidentiti*. Tokyo: Sairyūsha, 2007. Print.
- Ōtsuka, Eiji. “*Kanojo tachi*” no rengō sekigun: *sabukaruchaa to seigo minshushugi*. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1996. Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2001. Print.
- . *Shōjo minzokugaku: seikimatsu no shinwa o tsumugu “miko no matsuei.”* Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1989. Print.
- Robertson, Jennifer. *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. 1998. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001. Print.
- Saitō, Minako. *Kō itten ron: anime, tokusatsu, denki no hiroin-zō*. Tokyo: Village Center, 1998. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2001. Print.
- Sato, Barbara. *The New Japanese Women: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.
- Shamoon, Deborah. “*Revolutionary Romance: The Rose of Versailles and the Transformation of Shojo Manga.*” *Mechademia 2* (2007): 3-17. Print.
- Takatori, Ei. *Berusaiyu no bara eien ni....* Tokyo: Shōbunkan, 1994. Print.
- Tanaka, Mitsu. *Doko ni iyō to riburian*. Tokyo: Shakai hyōron sha, 1983. Print.
- Welker, James. “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: Boy’s Love as Girls’ Love in Shōjo Manga.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31:3 (2006): 841-870. Print.
- Yamamoto, Fumiko, and BL Supporters. *Yappari bōizu rabu ga suki*. Tokyo: Ōta shuppan, 2005. Print.
- Yonezawa, Yoshihiro. *Sengo shōjo manga-shi*. 1980. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2007. Print.

ⁱ In Japanese names, family names come before given names. I follow this order in this paper, except for names of those who publish in English.

ⁱⁱ All translations into English are my own, unless otherwise noted.

iii “The Year 24 Group” is not a self-organized group. It is a label used to categorize female artists around this time who contributed to the development of contents and visual aspects of girls’ manga. Hagio Moto, Takemiya Keiko, Ōshima Yumiko, and Yamagishi Ryōko are seen as representatives, but Ikeda is sometimes included as well.

iv Images of Shiseidō’s advertisement can be seen on page 76 in *Berusaiyu no bara daijiten*.

v Henceforth, only the volume number is specified when quoting from *The Rose of Versailles*.

vi See my article, “Two-dimensional Imagination in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Performance” (forthcoming in T212 *TDR*). See also Honda’s *Kodomo no ryōya kara* (1983), Kawamura’s *Otome no shintai: onna no kindai to sekushuariti* (1994), and Ōtsuka’s *Shōjo minzokugaku: seikimatsu no shinwa o tsumugu “miko no matsuei”* (1989), among others.

vii “Girls” in the modern period meant young women in the (upper-) middle class whose families were wealthy enough to send their daughters to girls’ schools. However, the category is more inclusive in the postwar period, as more and more women started to have at least high school education. In 1970, the percentage of women who went on to high schools exceeded 80 per cent for the first time. See the Japanese government’s report, *Seishōnen hakusho*.

viii In her article, “Revolutionary Romance: *The Rose of Versailles* and the Transformation of Shōjo Manga” (2007), Deborah Shamoan argues that *The Rose of Versailles* is important because it depicted the adult heterosexual relationship in girls’ manga, “which tends to favor homosocial and homosexual relationships” (4). She further states that the piece is yet “a compromise between the adolescent world of *dōseiai* (“same-sex attachment”) and the adult world of heterosexual romance” (8). This is based on the biased assumption that the same-sex attachment or erotics is the escapist desire of those who cannot become adult, that is, heterosexual.

Moreover, her argument makes it sound that the majority of girls' manga is concerned about homosocial and homosexual relationships, which is not the case.

^{ix} This type of manga was originally categorized as “*shōnen-ai*” manga. The literal translation of *shōnen-ai* is “boy love,” but what is now referred to as “boys’ love” (BL) is not always the same with *shōnen-ai*. There is no space to explain the difference in this essay, but for more information, see Yamamoto Fumiko and BL Supporters’ *Yappari bōizu rabu ga suki* (2005).

^x In her discussion of the early stage of BL manga, Ishida Minori also points out that by identifying with boys, women can experience both the subject and the object positions (98-100). However, she draws from the representation of homoeroticism in literature and does not discuss the visual images of manga. In addition, Nagakubo Yōko suggests the same type of pleasure that female readers experience in reading BL novels (290).

^{xi} See her online essay, “Akogare no Yōroppa.” Also, in his article “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: ‘Boys’ Love’ as Girls’ Love in Shōjo Manga” (2006), James Welker offers a lesbian reading of representative BL (more precisely, *shōnen-ai*) manga in the 1970s and 1980s.

^{xii} Mass media circulated a view that these women were killed because of jealousy of Nagata Hiroko, one of the leaders of the URA as she was said to be not attractive in the standard way. What is less clear is how her feelings were shaped by her own struggles within the masculinist society of Japan and student movements. For a more complicated reading of her motives, see Ōtsuka Eiji’s *Kanojotachi no reigō sekigun* (1996, 2001) and Oguma Eiji’s *1968* (2009).

^{xiii} See her her book, *Doko ni iyō to riburian* (1983).

^{xiv} She died of illness in prison on February 5, 2011.

^{xv} However, it is important to note that early feminist consciousness was born during the French Revolution in France. There was a group of women who demanded the right to form a female

unit of the national guard, although the request was ignored. In 1793, a group of militant women established their society, the Club des Citoyennes Republicanes, for the purpose of securing food. Olympe de Gouges published a pamphlet, “The Rights of Women” in 1791, demanding that women gain the rights equal to men’s (Forrest 102-103).

^{xvi} It should be noted here that BL manga sometimes finds homoeroticism in Nazi images. There are several BL manga which feature Nazi members as characters. One might argue that the homosexualization of Nazis challenges its persecution of homosexuals in some ways, but this does not seem to be the case. Girls’ manga writers who initiated BL often list Luchino Visconti’s film as their source of inspiration (Ishida 141). For them, his films are “romantic,” while male literati such as Mishima Yukio see the political protest in his *The Damned* (1969), which is about the steel industrial family manipulated by the Nazi Party (Ishida 126-154). Mishima considered that the film contrasted sexually “normal” males to “abnormal” ones in the “abnormal” political situation and that being “abnormal” was a “genuinely human” response to this “abnormal” regime. On the other hand, girls’ manga writers used Visconti’s films as sources for recreating romantic European atmosphere in their works (Ishida 141). They observed the details of items in his films, such as lace attached to dresses.

^{xvii} In Jacques Demy’s film adaptation, Oscar does not fight in the battle and therefore she does not die. Many fans were disappointed by this change, as one of them writes in her blog, “Oscar must die as a soldier who protects citizens!” See “Midori no hitori goto” (Midori’s Monologue).