"Looking Old, Feeling Young: Representations of Old Women in *Shōjo* Manga"

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THE POETICS OF AGEING: CONFRONTING, RESISTING, AND TRANSCENDING MORTALITY IN THE JAPANESE NARRATIVE ARTS

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Introduction: *Shōjo Manga* and Aging

Shōjo manga, or girls' comics, is a subgenre of manga that developed in Japan beginning in the 1950s and is characterized by its female-centered production and consumption.[1] Except for a short period in the beginning, women have been the main creators of s*hōjo manga*, and their works have been published in magazines targeting young girls, and have been consumed by girls and young women. While editors and publishing-house executives in decision-making positions have traditionally been men, their decisions on what to publish have often been based on what was popular among young female readers.

Therefore, it is natural that the majority of *shōjo manga*'s central characters have been girls and young women. It is also natural that when both readers and authors grew older, the subject of aging and the depiction of middle-aged and older women as central characters began to appear. The appearance of middle-aged and older characters disproves two presumptions: that *shōjo manga* avoids any issue that does not directly concern its targeted age group, and that young girls do not want to read about aging.[2] In this essay, I will discuss how some *shōjo manga* authors have presented older women and the issue of aging, and how they have created a world in which the exploration of complex and various issues concerning aging have been made possible by the graphic techniques that are particular to the *manga* genre. I argue that *shōjo manga* authors have had a female-centered approach to aging and that they have presented older women in sympathetic ways. These depictions help younger readers learn to see older

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[1] For the definition of *shōjo manga*, see Matt Thorn's "*Shōjo Manga—* Something for the Girls." *Japan Quarterly* 48.3 (2001): 43-50.

[2] Moto Hagio's "*Gurensumisu no nikki*" (The Diary of Glen Smith, 1972) is among the early examples that have an old woman as the main character.

women in non-stereotypical ways and to visualize their own futures as older women. I will discuss some examples and point out some of the innovative techniques that *shōjo manga* authors have used: these techniques are what I call "subjective visual representation" and "*manga* realism."

Subjective Visual Representation in *"Tanabe no Tsuru"*

"Subjective visual representation" refers to a type of graphic representation that reflects the consciousness of a certain character. A similar technique has been used in films; one of the early examples is Charlie Chaplin's *Gold Rush* (1925), in which a starved man thinks Chaplin is a giant chicken and tries to catch and eat him. (Figure 1) A more recent example is *Shallow Hal* (2001) in which the hypnotized male protagonist falls in love with a 300-pound woman, who, from his perspective, looks slender and beautiful like Gwyneth Paltrow. (Figure 2) As can be understood from these examples, film primarily uses this technique to create the absurd and nonsensical effects that are usually reserved for comedies. By contrast, this "subjective visual representation" is used in manga in more substantial and sophisticated ways, as Izumi Nobuyuki demonstrates in *Manga o mekuru bōken — yomikata kara miekata made: Great Trip Leafing through a Book.* Izumi discusses various point-of-view techniques of *manga* in details, explaining this type of representation as the combination of "subjective POV" (point of view) and "OOB" (out of body or autoscopic) perspective.[3]

The innovative and conscious use of subjective visual representation was introduced to manga in 1978 by Yumiko Ōshima's *Wata no kuni hoshi* (*The Star of Cottonland*), in which the central character, a female kitten named Chibineko Suwano, perceives herself, as well as other cats, as being almost-human. (She believes that she will grow up to be an elegant human lady. The cats in the story understand human language, although humans do not understand them.) (Figure 3) Importantly, Ōshima

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[3] Nobuyuki Izumi, *Manga o mekuru bōken—yomikata yara miekata made: Great Trip Leafing through a Book,* 2nd ed. (Np.: Piano Fire Publishing House, 2008), 43-45.

uses this technique in later works such as "*Kinpatsu no sōgen*" ("The Blond Prairie") (1983) and "*Natsu no yo no baku*" ("The Summer Night *Baku*") (1988) to represent old men. In the former, an 80-year-old man, believing that he is a young man, falls in love with a 19-year-old care worker (Figure 4). In the latter, the protagonist is a 12-year-old boy, who perceives everyone, including himself, as being physically as young or old as his or her mental and behavioral age. Childish and self-centered people like his parents look childish, while he, a child mature for his age, looks like a young adult. The protagonist's grandfather is depicted as a baby, which is how the protagonist perceives his mental status. (Figure 5)

Fumiko Takano's "*Tanabe no Tsuru*" (1980) is a good example of how "subjective visual representation" can present the issue of aging, with its concomitant physical and psychological complexities through the way it depicts an old woman. Many critics have discussed this work and have praised Takano's innovative representation of the old woman's inner reality. Tsuru, an 82-year-old woman, lives with her son Kinzō, his wife Nobue, their teenage daughter Rurika, and their 11-year-old son Kaneo (the story does not specify whether her husband is dead or if so, when). Because of dementia, Tsuru perceives herself as a child and behaves like one as is shown by her graphic representations. (Figure 6) The reader learns that she is an old woman by the written description and conversations in the balloons presented along with the pictures. (Figure 7)

Tsuru enters Rurika's room and meets her boyfriend who happens to be visiting. Rurika, embarrassed and irritated by her grandmother's strange behavior, indignantly tells her to get out. The closed door causes Tsuru to have flashbacks, all of which involve a closed door; Tsuru goes through the experiences of a small girl confined in a closet for punishment, a young mother ordering her son to come out of his room, and a frightened wife trying to persuade her husband to open the door and not to "do anything rash." (Figure 8) When Rurika opens the door, Tsuru seems to have returned to her usual level of mental status: that of a young child whose verbal responses are slightly out of context.

In "*Tanabe no tsuru*," subjective visual representation is used effectively to depict an old woman and her distorted

perception of reality, including her physical and mental self-image. As Satoshi Kimata points out in *Imēji no zuzō gaku: hanten suru shisen* (Iconography of Images: Reversing the Gaze), "*Tanabe no Tsuru*," in a seemingly effortless way, represents the multiplicity of perceived realities that Henry James and Natsume Sōseki have tried to represent through the form of the novel, in *The Turn of the Screw* and *Kokoro,* respectively. Kimata argues that Takano succeeds in opening up new metonymic possibilities for pictures by making use of the contradiction between the drawing that represents her as a child and the written words that address her as an old woman.[4] The technique of subjective visual representation is used in depicting one of the most important issues pertaining to aging: the gap between the aging/aged person's self-perception and the objective reality, especially in terms of appearances.

I would add that Tsuru's confusion and distorted self-image is represented even more effectively because Tsuru is drawn in a simplified and caricaturized style while everything else, including other characters, is drawn in a more realistic style. This shows not only that Tsuru perceives herself as a child and that her reality is much different from everyone else's, but also that she lives in the world of girlish fantasy consisting of pretty clothes and ribbons, in which marriage only means a beautiful wedding gown. (Figure 9) When she is more deeply involved in her fantasy, her figure grows even closer to the old-fashioned picture book format, revealing her distance from outer reality.

Representation of Older Women in "*Manga* Realism"

"*Manga* realism" may sound like an oxymoron, since *manga*, by definition, is caricature characterized by simplified and often exaggerated forms. I use the term to make it distinct from "realism," which is often used to describe a graphic style that is

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[4] Satoshi Kimata, *Imēji no zuzō gaku: hanten suru shisen* (Iconography of Images: Reversing the Gaze) (Kyoto: Hakujisha, 1992), 43-45.

closer to photographic images.[5] What I mean by "*manga* realism" is part of *manga* literacy, or the set of rules that Samuel R. Delany defines as "generic protocols" that we apply when reading genre fictions.[6] Delaney explains that, for example, while the sentence "her world exploded" means specific psychological state of mind in "mundane" fiction, because of "generic protocols" particular to science fiction novels the same sentence may literally mean that the planet belonging to a character has exploded. Similarly, when we read *manga*, we are expected to possess a certain level of *manga* literacy and to read according to *manga* protocols—an important part of which is to accept caricatured characters as "real." For example, *Chibi Maruko-chan* (1986-1996), a popular *shōjo manga*, drawn in a simple caricatured style, is to be read as "realistic," since all the characters and the backgrounds are drawn in a coherent style. (Figure 10) On the other hand, Eiji Nonaka's *Sakigake! Kuromati kōkō* (Kromatie High School) uses a more realistic style than *Chibi Maruko-chan* in the conventional sense, but is considered absurd because different levels of caricatures coexist. (Figure 11) If older women are drawn in the same graphic style as the other characters, we are supposed to assume that we take them seriously, not as absurd caricatures.

As is often the case in the United States, Japan's older women tend to be the target of ridicule and are often seen as funny, comically or tragically pathetic, or simply grotesque, particularly in their concern about issues of beauty and clothing. Older women romantically pursuing younger men tend to be more despised and ridiculed than older men going after younger women. In such a context, the depiction of women breaking these social taboos without punishment is itself a strong message. What I call

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[5] For example, Katsuhiro Ōtomo's works are often described as "realism." Ōtomo's style was considered groundbreaking in the 1970s and has influenced many *manga* authors, including Takano.
  For the detailed discussion of the concept and development of realism in *manga*, see the chapter on   realism in Gō Itō's *Tezuka Is Dead: Hirakareta manga hyōgen ron e* (NTT, 2005).

[6] Samuel R. Delany, "Generic Protocols: Science Fiction and Mundane," in *The Technological   Imagination: Theories and Fictions, 175*-93, eds. Teresa De Lauretis et al (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1990), 177.

"*manga* realism" has been an effective technique to represent older women who freely break social taboos. In other words, *shōjo manga* has used "*manga* realism" to represent older women as an important part of the world, inviting readers to take them and, consequently, issues concerning aging seriously.

One of the earlier examples of presenting older women in "*manga* realism" is *Orenji peko no Aoko-san* (Ms. Aoko of Orange Pekoe) by Mayumi Tomitsuka (1982). (Figure 12). Aoko, a 60-year-old widow who lives with her son and his family (his wife, a teenage daughter, and a younger son), enjoys tennis, motorcycling, singing rock music with a local group, playing violin, flirting with a childhood friend, and falling in love with good-looking younger men. She particularly enjoys dressing up in pretty clothes that are obviously designed for younger women. Her family members are often embarrassed by Aoko's behaviors and appearances, but basically love her as she is. In addition, they, as well as Aoko's friends, admire Aoko's positive attitude and willingness to try new things. She is physically older, but except for the lines on her face that represent wrinkles, she is not very graphically different from the younger characters or the images of the younger woman that she once was. When we accept Aoko as realistic, we are also led to accept her behaviors and appearances as realistic. The pictures themselves, along with the story line, send young female readers the message that women do not have to give up having fun just because they are older. (Figure 13)

Another and more widely read example is Akemi Matsunae's *Katorea na onna-tachi* (The Cattleya Women) (1988-91), along with its sequel *Onna-tachi no miyako* (The Women's City, 1992-94. The central characters are three rich sisters who live in "Cattleya House," a nursing home they own. Benefitting from inheritances left by their husbands and their own business skills, the sisters have enough money to enjoy a retirement filled with shopping and boy chasing. In each episode they are presented in outrageously decorative attires; most of their clothes are apparently designed for younger women. The enjoyment they receive from dressing up is emphasized repeatedly. The three sisters insist that they have a fundamental right to dress as they want and to enjoy the act itself. They strongly resent anyone who suggests they modify their behavior to meet society's

expectations, declaring that they are going to do whatever they want and look however they want. At the level of visual representation, their gorgeous dresses are depicted "realistically," thus sending readers the message that older women enjoying themselves in non-stereotypical life styles exists within the realm of possibility. (Figure 14)

Still another example is *Tasogare dansu kurabu* (Twilight Dance Club, 1996-98) by Akiko Miyawaki. Its protagonist is Koume Shibukawa, a widow in her 70s, who enjoys participating in a social dancing club for senior citizens. For Koume and other members of the club, Western-style social dancing is a symbol of post-World War II democracy and women's liberation, as well as a way to satisfy their yearning for beauty and fun, which had been suppressed during the war years. As in *The Cattleya Women*, Koume and other Twilight members are depicted joyfully dancing in costumes that would be considered loud and unbecoming to older people. The way they are drawn within "*manga* realism," however, indicates that these older women are to be taken seriously; although they may not live up to contemporary standards of beauty, they are not to be dismissed as "unrealistic."

The Way of Seeing Older Women: Younger Characters' Perspective

It is important that all my examples also include the perspective of younger characters. In "*Tanabe no Tsuru*," Rurika describes her grandmother as "weird" and "crazy," thus emphasizing the pathetic gap between her own perception of reality and that of her grandmother's. Rurika is irritated and frightened because she does not see what Tsuru is seeing.

Meanwhile, younger people in the other three works of "*manga* realism," namely *Ms. Aoko*, *The Cattleya Women*, and *Twilight Dance Club*, are more sympathetic. In fact, in all of these stories, they learn to see older women differently. Because they are closer to the intended readers' age, the younger characters in these *manga* model how to see older women in non-stereotypical ways and to accept their activities and appearances even when they are not "acting their age."

For example, Aoko's family begs her to wear an overcoat when she goes out at night so that their neighbors do not see her in

disco clothes (Figure 15). *The Cattleya Women* and *The Women's City* present numerous episodes in which younger people, including the protagonists' family members, make negative comments on their appearances and behaviors. The younger characters are depicted as looking disgusted and horrified to see the older women dressed up in beautiful clothes. In the first episode of *The Women's City*, for example, a young female researcher approaches the three protagonists from behind, thinking that they are young women. When she recognizes that they are older women in young women's clothes, she runs away devastated (Figure 16). In *Twilight Dance Club*, Koume's grandson, Ikuo, who is a narrator of the episodes, often makes negative comments on Koume's social dancing activities, especially about the dresses she and her friends wear for the occasion. Ikuo finds the sight of their dancing disgusting, ugly, and horrifying, and tries to hide his grandmother's embarrassing activity from his friends.

In these *manga* stories, however, the younger characters eventually accept the older women's appearances and activities. When they hear other people making positive comments, they learn to positively accept the older women's activities and appearances. Through their interactions with the older women which include watching them enjoy themselves without worrying about what other people may think, the younger characters learn to see the unconventional older women not only positively but as role models.

Aoko accumulates praises when she plays tennis, dances at a disco, and sings in a concert. In spite of her unconventional behavior and clothes, she attracts male admirers and younger female fans. In *The Cattleya Women*, Nogiku, the granddaughter of one of the sisters, along with her friends, learns to respect the protagonists. Nogiku and her friends admire the older women's willingness to do whatever they want to do, no matter what other people think. Other young people, when they learn that the three sisters are competent business women, also begin to respect them. Even when they do not appreciate the sisters' extravagantly unconventional appearances, they learn that these older women deserve respect and have the right to pursue beauty, romance, and fun as much as, if not more than, younger women.

Twilight Dance Club deals most consciously with young

people's view of older women. At the beginning of the story, the reader sees older women with heavy makeup dressed up in dancing costumes and is told that this is a horrifying and detestable sight. (Figure 18) This is, however, a subjective visual representation perceived by Ikuo, a male college student. When he becomes more accepting toward the club members, visual representations of the elderly dancers subtly change, reflecting the change in Ikuo's perception. (Figure 19) In Ikuo's mind, they may be old but they are no longer horrifying or pathetically detestable. In the case of *Twilight Dance Club*, "*manga* realism" and "subjective visual representation" are combined to express how Ikuo's perception of older women is transformed in a subtle but significant way toward the end of the story.

These examples of "*manga* realism" convey the message that older women have the right to dress up, enjoy themselves, and seek romance—and even to become sexually active—and that younger people should accept the idea. This message is expressed graphically as well as verbally throughout these works. The fact that the liberated older women are drawn as realistically as the younger characters is part of this message; they should be taken seriously. Their pursuits of physical beauty, fun, and romance should be taken as seriously as those undertaken by the younger characters.

Conclusion: Clothes as a Feminist Issue

It is important to emphasize that the elderly female characters in these examples are members of the middle and upper-middle class. The Cattleya sisters are wealthy; Koume in *Twilight Dance Club* is "the richest in the family" and is the sole owner of the house in which she and her son's family live.[7] Although her financial situation is not mentioned in the story, Aoko seems to have enough money of her own. For these characters, the affluent society of contemporary Japan represents the best time of their lives.

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[7] Akiko Miyawaki, *Tasogare dansu kurabu* (Twilight Dance Club, 1996-98) (Shūeisha, 1998), 77.

It is no accident that in all the stories, including "*Tsuru*," clothing is of primary importance. Since the end of the World War II, as recalled by Koume, beautiful clothes have symbolized freedom for many women. While young women enjoyed their newly gained freedom to wear skirts, younger girls enjoyed coloring dresses in picture books, to which Takano makes obvious reference. (Figure 20) In the 1970s and 1980s, women's economic power became apparent in their consumption of fashion products; buying and wearing the clothes of their choice was a symbol of economic and ideological independence of women from their parents and from men.

Women in the 1980s earned more money than ever before, and they had greater freedom to spend it according to their own desires. Often criticized for their shallow materialistic values, these young working women were pejoratively called "Hanako zoku" (after the then popular fashion/travel/ shopping/culture magazinetargeted toward young working women), but they became aware of the positive message included in the lure of materialism—you do not have to live according to sexist stereotypes if you are economically independent. Clothes offered one of the most obvious venues by which women experienced and expressed their newly gained power, freedom, and independence.

It is a common understanding that *shōjo manga* hit its prime in the late 1970s through the 1980s. I believe, however, that the genre has survived and has the possibility to produce more fruitful works. While *shōjo manga* is a popular entertainment media for a limited audience range, it has explored expressive possibilities and dealt with serious social issues, producing innovative works. The genre has greatly influenced girls and women and will continue to do so. Other subgenres of *manga*, such as *manga* for boys and young men, will continue to benefit from innovative *shōjo manga* as well.
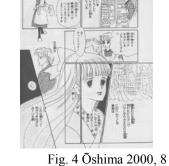
Figures

Fig. 1 Gold Rush (1925)

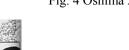Fig. 2 Shallow Hall (2001)

Fig. 3, Ōshima 1994, title page

Fig. 4 Ōshima 2000, 8

Fig. 5 Ōshima 1995. 119

Fig. 6 Takano 1980, 69
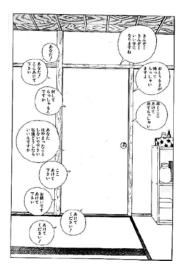

Fig. 7 Takano 1980, 70

Fig. 8 Takano 1980, 80

Fig. 9 Takano 1980, title page

Fig. 10 Sakura Vol. 6, 65

Fig. 11 Nonaka Vol. 1, 107

Fig. 12 Tomitsuka Vol. 2, title page

Fig. 13 Tomitsuka Vol. 1, 111

Fig. 14 Matsunae 1991, 19

Fig. 15 Tomitsuka Vol. 1, 70

Fig. 16 Matsunae 1994 Vol. 1, 8
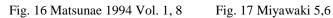

Fig. 17 Miyawaki 5,6

Fig. 18 Miyawaki 106, 10

Fig. 19 Tatsuya Kiichi, coloring book (1997, 25)

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