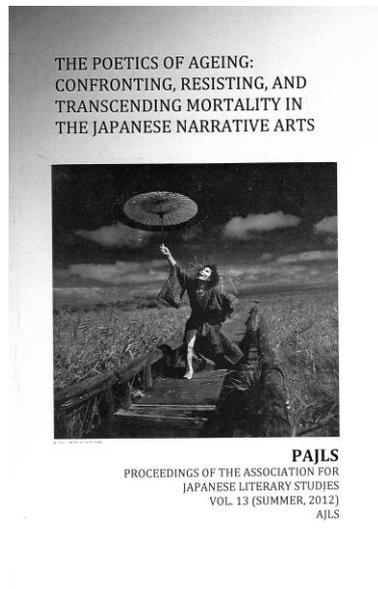


“Middle-Aged Mama: Uchida Shungiku Faces Fifty”

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Middle-Aged Mama: Uchida Shungiku Faces Fifty

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Uchida Shungiku (born 1959) has made a career of publically defining herself in overtly sexual terms. In her early years, this sexuality was a dark presence in her creative work, and nowhere more so than in her notorious, semi-autobiographical novel *Father Fucker* (1993). The same year, however, Uchida offered her readers a radically different vision of sex and the female body, one that would come to take center stage in her own project of self-creation and representation. This vision was epitomized by her work as a manga artist, and in particular by her long-running series *Watashitachi wa hanshoku shite iru* (*We Are Reproducing*, known affectionately by its fans as *Watahan*), the story of a woman, Gigi, her steadily growing brood of children, and her hot-and-cold relationships with their fathers—most of whom remain unmarried to her. With these works, which won the Bunkamura Deux Magots Prize in 1994, Uchida quickly gained a large and loyal readership, beginning her career as a professional avatar of the unwed mother. As she writes in the first volume of *Watahan*, "To my children I am probably just 'Mom'. As far as I'm concerned, though, I'm just who I am (*watashi wa watashi da*)."¹ In the pages and issues that follow, Uchida depicts herself first and foremost as a sexual woman, one who sees no need to give up an active and adventurous love life just because she has children, and for whom fulfilling sex is essential to being "who she is."

The extremely candid and intensely personal way that Uchida approaches sex in *Watahan* is meant to reflect her own attitudes and experiences. Indeed, despite the sometimes cartoonish quality of its characters, *Watahan* often amounts to thinly-veiled "self-writing" on Uchida's part (hence her seemingly contradictory description of the series as a work of "autobiographical fiction"). In her frequent interviews and public

¹Uchida Shungiku, *Watashitachi wa hanshoku shite iru ierō* (*We Are Reproducing Yellow*) (Kadokawa bunko, 1994), 186-7.

appearances, Uchida has revealed many details about her life and that of her family, which make it clear that the characters and experiences chronicled in *Watahan* are drawn from personal experience, despite the pseudonyms borne by her protagonists. The fact that Uchida explicitly indicates in certain panels that a particular story is *not* true only highlights the degree to which *Watahan* is meant to be read, on the whole, as something akin to "reality TV," rather than as a traditional *manga*. This porous boundary between fact and fiction, in turn, allows Uchida to use her *manga* as a vehicle not only for entertaining storytelling, but also for elaborating her own, often controversial public stances on marriage and the family.

In particular, Uchida has long advocated uncoupling the institution of marriage from childbearing. Three different men fathered her four children, and three of those children were conceived out of wedlock. Indeed, the only man with whom she had a child while also his wife (Takayama Yūya) also fathered her third child (a daughter) while she was still married to someone else. Subsequently, Uchida divorced Takayama not only because of friction with his traditionally-minded family, but as a social and political protest against the economic disadvantages placed upon women by marriage and the inequitable treatment of women in divorce proceedings.² Despite their divorce, they continue to live together and parent their children. Takayama is an actor whose career has not reached the same heights as Uchida's.

Uchida's ideas about marriage, family, and relationships frame and are explored in the *Watahan* series, which provides the author with a forum in which she can expound her beliefs in a gentle, humorous, and generally positive way. Like Uchida, *Watahan's* central character, Gigi, has four children: two sons and two daughters. All of them live with her, and the two older children seem to have no contact with their fathers. Also like Uchida, Gigi has entered the childbearing game later than most Japanese women, first becoming a mother in her early 30s and

² Uchida Shungiku, "Mō yome to wa yobasenai—sandome no rikontodoke ni kometa ikari to hankō" [Don't make me be called a bride—resistance to and anger over my third divorce decree] in *Fujin Kōron* 7 (February 2006): 46.

giving birth to her last child a decade later. As a result, during its early years *Watahan* was primarily a collection of funny stories about diapers and babies, interspersed with information about giving birth and being pregnant. Since the birth of Gigi's last child, however, the series has focused more on the children's lives, such as the youngest son's fascination with collecting insects or the oldest daughter's spate of school truancy. Characterizing all of the volumes, however, is Gigi's refusal to let being a mother extinguish her saucy sexual persona. Uchida repeatedly shows Gigi having fulfilling sex, often depicting her in the throes of passion while a small child sleeps beside her. Rather than hiding her sexuality from her children, she flaunts it, and while she eventually becomes more reticent about engaging in sex while they are present, she continues talking about it openly—to the embarrassment of her oldest son, who cannot stand it when she talks about penises while walking down the street or discusses her sex life in front of his friends. In one scene, Milly is walking down the street with her son and her partner. As the words, “*Da kara, chinko ga. . .*” (Of course, penises. . .) come out of her mouth, a woman passes by. Her son, who is in his teens, wails, “*Kaachan, ima hito ga tōtta ja nai ka? Yoso no hito ga chikaku ni iru toki wa chinko wa yamete yo.*” (Mom, people are passing by. When people we don't know are around, stop talking about penises.) She protests, “*Nani itten no? Hito ga tōtta kurai de, chinko to ka ienai nara, motomoto konna kyara ja nai shi.*” (What are you saying? If I don't say penis when people are going past, then naturally I'm not this kind of manga character.) Her partner says in response to her son's complaints, “*Akirame.*” (Just give up).³ This scene, early in the book, sets the stage for Milly's public struggle with her sexuality and her family's reaction to it.

As the *Watahan* series moves along, however, the problems and challenges faced by its protagonist changes in notable ways. How, Uchida asks, does someone who has crafted her identity around sex and being publicly 'sexy' deal with the aging process? And how does someone who has flaunted the status quo in order to live life on her own terms deal with expectations and life experiences that challenge her own? This kind of serious

³Uchida Shungiku, *Omae no kaachan BITCH!* (Bunka sha, 2010), 5.

reflection has occasionally found a home in the pages and pictures of *Watahan*. In volume two, *Watashitachi wa hanshoku shite iru buruu*, for example, Uchida provides a rather somber account of Gigi's breech delivery of her second child, while volume eight depicts her growing problems with her partner Takayama, ending with her decision that he should live elsewhere. On the whole, though, such knotty and existential questions are an odd fit with the series' generally light-hearted, humorous tone and family-oriented subject matter.⁴ Uchida's rift with her partner in volume eight is healed by the beginning of volume nine, and in the next volume Gigi's fiftieth birthday—an occasion with rich potential for reflection on the aging process—takes place with little fanfare.⁵ Instead, Uchida has tended to use stand-alone volumes to explain or elaborate on the side stories to which she merely alludes in the *Watahan* series, offering more of her own insights and referring directly to her own personal history to produce stories that are at once much darker and that more explicitly reveal the serious challenges that Gigi, and Uchida herself, face.

The first such book was *S4G (Sex for Girls)*, Uchida's 2007 exploration of women's sexuality in the guise of a sex education manual. In it, Uchida positions herself as a frank and unrelenting truth-teller about the process of girls' sexual maturation, using her own past as a pedagogical example for others as well as a cautionary tale about the abuse and mistreatment of women, with her oldest son acting as a fictional interlocutor for the latter discussion. Three years later, Uchida dealt with a different, but no less fraught, set of personal issues in *Omae no kaachan BITCH [Your Mom's a Bitch]* presented as a kind of "behind-the-scenes" companion to the *Watahan* series describing Gigi's troubled relationship with her live-in partner.

⁴Uchida does finally deal with her break up with Takayama in her later volumes of *Watahan*.

⁵Gigi's day is rather normal and Uchida depicts her going to work, dealing with a computer problem and then coming home to have a cake with her family. She tells her staff calmly that it's her fiftieth birthday, and aside from wishing her congratulations, there is nothing else. Uchida Shungiku, *Watashitachi wa hanshoku shite iru 10*, (Bunkasha, 2010), 86. Earlier in the book she does show off her new naval piercing.

Despite its cluttered organization, *Omae* has at its narrative and thematic center a pair of distinct, but ultimately interwoven, themes: the nature of enduring relationships and the role of fidelity within them, and the place of sex and sexuality in a middle-aged woman's life.

Told in Uchida's familiar four-panel or *yon-koma* style, *Omae* proceeds episodically, with the two overarching stories running through the book.⁶ As in the *Watahan* series, the family at the heart of the story is made up of a mother (Millie), her partner (Parake), and four children (two boys and two girls, named "Ein", "Zwei", "Drei", and "Dettan"). Despite their different names, these characters are drawn identically to those in *Watahan*, indicating that Uchida wants her readers to read the new family's story as parallel, or perhaps complementary, to that found in the pages of her ongoing popular series. The most immediate contrast between *Omae* and *Watahan* is in their respective portrayals of the mother's relationship with her partner—peaceful and loving in *Watahan*, volatile and contentious in *Omae*. Notably, the instigator of these conflicts is Millie, who engages in a series of affairs that leave her partner constantly suspicious of her and ultimately mad with jealousy. He openly accuses her of infidelity, calls her constantly while she is away on business, and insists that she film her hotel rooms so that he can be sure there is no other man with her. Millie does her best to evade Parake's scrutiny: in one scene, she is dutifully filming her room while talking to her partner, but only the reader can see a man curled around her legs outside of the camera's frame. After discovering each of her affairs, Parake attacks Millie physically. They have violent and angry sex, and Millie later seethes about his jealousy and his angry outbursts. As the book progresses, she fights with him more openly and aggressively, often bursting out of the house with only her cellphone and wallet. As his jealousy mounts, Parake tries new

⁶Almost all of Uchida's material for the *Watahan* series is first published in *Mikosuri Hagekijō* that specialized in publishing manga in a 4-koma format. This manga magazine was aimed primarily at adults. This accounts for the non-linear narrative style that characterizes her manga. Uchida also creates a special ten-page story just for the volume that usually addresses some issue of concern for her.

techniques to ensure she is not cheating. Following Milly's new trend of wearing kimono, he notices that her obi is tied in a particular style with the pattern of a fish prominent on the top of the knot. He shouts at her that she had better not come back with the pattern changed. When she does come home, obi intact, she sarcastically asks if she can loosen it to bathe, and he begs her forgiveness.⁷

As such episodes make clear, sex is at the heart of the conflict between Millie and Parake. This problem, however, is as much a crime of omission as it is one of commission. From the opening pages of *Omae*, Millie is shown as a sexually active and adventurous woman, describing her favorite sexual positions and comically describing the awkward contortions required for effective oral sex. After this graphic opening section, however, it becomes clear that Millie is worried about the effects of aging and parenting on her sex life. Uchida emphasizes the sexual connection that Millie continues to feel with her partner, despite their conflicted relationship—sometimes, she remarks, "it seems that our only connection is a bodily one" (*Kono hito wa. . . karada dake de musubitsuite n ka na ...*), and between their fights Millie and Parake engage in mutually satisfying sex.⁸ Many times, however, their love-making attempts are interrupted by children or by their busy schedules. There seems to be a child banging on the door or sleeping with them at all times. Even their creative attempt to have sex at different times of the day is thwarted by inquisitive children; in one memorable scene, Millie and Parake are caught in the act by a child who has picked the lock to their bedroom door. Millie ends up lecturing their daughter about privacy, "*Shimatteru tokī, raburabuchū date itte aru deshō?*" (Haven't I told you when it's closed, we are making love?).⁹

Despite these roadblocks, Millie refuses to forego sex and the pleasure that comes with it. At first she experiments with a vibrator, which was given to her by a friend. When she gets it, she is pleased with its look, "*Wah kawaii vaibu!*" (What a cute vibrator!), and is amazed by the fact that the batteries can last

⁷Uchida, *Omae*, 78.

⁸Ibid., 117.

⁹Ibid., 64.

seven hours and that it runs so quietly. Her partner notes, “*Oto ga shizuka de mo koe ookii shi.*” (It’s quiet but you are loud.)¹⁰ Ultimately, she finds it and masturbation to be poor substitutes for human sexual contact, leading her to seek sex away from the distractions and conflicts within her home. A series of affairs with younger men follow, but they too are unsatisfactory: one man’s body temperature is too hot, making him uncomfortable to the touch; another wants to parlay his relationship with her into professional advancement, and declines to go back to her room when he realizes that the affair for her is more than “strictly business.”¹¹

In her search for regular, fulfilling sex, Millie finds herself talking to other women facing similar problems, and is angered to discover the misapprehensions and misinformation that plague their lives. After one woman explains that she has stopped having sex because her husband never initiates it any more, Millie goes on a tirade against old-fashioned attitudes that prevent women from expressing their desires and acting on them. She wonders if: “*Kō iu hito wa kono mama toshi o totte kekkon shite, otto ni ‘shite’ tte ienakute sekkusuresu to ka ni naru ka na?*” (I wonder if this kind of person—who can’t say “Do it” to their husbands—becomes sexless as they get older).¹²

In reaction against such quietism, Millie explores the phenomenon of the orgasm, something she admits she did not really understand until later in life. She draws a picture of a clitoris, recommends that women learn about theirs, and debunks several theories about the female orgasm, drawing upon and recommending Rolf Degen's *Orugasumusu no uso* (The Lies of Orgasm), recently translated by the Japanese publisher Bungei bunko. She talks about various myths of orgasm as well as the fact that there is no such thing as a G-spot. At one point, she turns to the reader and says, “*Orugasumu wa kuritorisu de shika okimasen.*” (Orgasms are only from the clitoris.)¹³

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

¹¹Ibid., 91.

¹²Ibid., 45.

¹³Ibid., 61.

Lurking in the background of Millie's search for sexual fulfillment is menopause, something presented less as an object of fear than as one of curiosity. Millie takes on the issue by saying that since she will soon turn fifty, she realizes that menopause is just around the corner. Shocked to read that women begin to lose their natural vaginal lubrication in their forties, Millie asks her partner if he has noticed any such changes. Although he assures her that nothing is wrong, she asks a doctor whether she should start using artificial lubricants. He suggests taking estrogen shots instead, an alternative that she rejects when one of her older friends tells her that estrogen treatments made her periods return. On the whole, however, menopause appears to be a vague deadline for Millie, prompting her to try and take better care of her body. Watching television with her son, she becomes self-conscious about the difference between the flat-bellied young women portrayed there and her own less-firm physique, an awareness only exacerbated when her son pinches her belly flab. Although she tries to explain her situation as a natural result of motherhood ("If I didn't have this fat," she tells her partner, "I couldn't have had four children"),¹⁴ his teasing response leads her to declare, "When my periods stop, I'm going to develop my muscles," accompanied by the unspoken and optimistic thought, "After menopause, I'm going to love lifting weights."¹⁵

Other scenes that address Millie's aging body are similarly lacking in self-pity or a sense of lost youth; instead, they serve to emphasize her refusal to let physical ailments curtail her sexuality. Millie's chronically sore jaw, for example, is presented as a potential impediment to performing fellatio (although her complaints in this regard clearly are meant to annoy her son, who is shown reacting with embarrassment to his mother's forthrightness). Another problem that Millie has through the book is sore legs and hips, a problem that she sees addressed in television infomercials for laundry-carrying devices starring older actors. Millie's proposed cures for both of these ailments, however, is a more direct form of physical therapy—namely, more oral sex and exercising her hip muscles by straddling her sexual

¹⁴Ibid., 37.

¹⁵Ibid.

partners. Amusingly, despite these signs of physical decay and Millie's increasing farsightedness ("I need glasses to eat my *natto*," she complains at one point), Uchida persists on drawing her with the same taut, perky breasts enjoyed by Gigi from the outset of the *Watahan* franchise.

Clearly, Millie's struggle for sexual pleasure (or perhaps, sexual relevance) as an older middle-aged woman plays a key part in her infidelity towards her partner, Parake; stifled by responsibilities and conventional family demands, she longs for freedom and release with other, younger men. At the same time, however, Millie's behavior and the conflicts that surround it are about more than just sex. By the end of the book, Millie's fights with Parake have started to take place in front of their children, something that they had previously been at pains to avoid. The episodes follow the same cycle of screaming, accusations, and then make-up sex, only now their children are troubled and unwilling witnesses to the process. After briefly trying to cast the children's disquiet as Parake's fault, Millie begins to talk to her friends about her relationship. At first, she attributes their problems to her partner's inability to accept her professional career; she remarks "*shigoto nai to aretari sunetari yatsuatari shitari*" (when he doesn't have a job, he is violent, peevish, and ill tempered).¹⁶ At the same time, his own lack of a steady income has become a source of stress for her. "*Watashi rainen 50 na no ni*," (I will be fifty next year) she complains, "*kono mama hitori de zen'in tabesasete iku no ka to omou to fuan de*," (I am worried that I can't feed everyone the way I'm going now).¹⁷ As a friend points out to her, however, simply having a partner with his own lucrative job brings its own costs: "*Kasēderu otoko tte minna 'ore-sama' da yo*" (Men who earn a salary tend to be really selfish) a comment that forces Millie to recognize the many other things that Parake contributes—cooking, laundry, cleaning, and even attending events at school.¹⁸ Parake's jealousy and violent

¹⁶Ibid., 133.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid. In particular it is crucial for a parent to be involved in a child's school. PTA participation is almost mandatory and there are numerous

outbursts are the product not just of his wounded ego, but of her selfish and domineering behavior, tantamount to *gekokujō*, the "subordinate pushing back against his superiors." As she realizes now, Parake's failure to satisfy her sexually, and to be available to her in the way that she wants, are the inevitable consequences of the other demands she has placed upon him—namely, to help parent her children, run her household, and enable her to pursue an artistic career.

Read in tandem with the *Watahan* series, therefore, *Omae* reveals that Gigi (and thus by extension Uchida herself) is at a turning point in her life, struggling to find common ground with her partner as her children stop needing so much of her hands-on mothering. With her youngest child in elementary school and her oldest trying to figure out his future, Uchida is trying to redefine herself outside of the sexpot mold. In the latest volumes of *Watahan*, for example, Uchida has changed the way that she depicts her alter ego, Gigi, clothing her in kimono around the house and when she goes out, as more mature women once did.¹⁹ Likewise, Gigi's formerly blonde hair, worn down or in an up-do, now is cut short, with a dyed streak on either side of her face—an iconic representation that mirrors Uchida's recent publicity photos of herself as a more 'mature', yet still physically attractive, woman. Millie's travails in *Omae*, however, also speak to a more pressing desire to redefine and reshape the male-female relationship, one that is not dominated by the pursuit of passionate sex or by the needs of her children. Ultimately, what Uchida is struggling with is the meaning of intimacy itself. Having inverted the normal Japanese gender patterns and expectations for relationships in order to live the life that she wanted, Uchida and her fictional doppelgangers now must deal with the consequences of having a partner who is increasingly unhappy with the compromises that such inversions have forced upon them. Just as importantly, the question of whether or not to end her relationship is not simply a

events that occur during the year where a parent should be present (assemblies, sports events, cooking events, etc).

¹⁹This is a style that older intellectual women have adopted in recent years for making public appearances. My thanks to the audience at the AJLS for pointing this out to me.

question of love, but of family. Millie might be able to live without her partner, but can she survive life alone with her kids?

As the *Watahan* series continues, and as Uchida's and Gigi's children get older and leave home, it will be interesting to see how Uchida portrays Gigi and her relationships, both parental and romantic. How will Gigi deal with menopause? How will her sex life with her partner change as she gets older? How will she respond to the sexual choices and relationships of her own children? In this respect, at least, Uchida's literary forebears have left her a number of potential models to follow or (just as likely) to subvert—for example, the crafty and manipulative old geisha in Okamoto Kanoko's *Rōgishō*, (The Old Geisha) or the wealthy older geisha in Hayashi Fumiko's *Bangiku* (Late Chrysanthemum) who contemplates giving her younger former love a loan. These women, still beautiful in their older years, resort to wiles and wealth to control the younger and more foolish people around them, while still seeking the comforts and the elusive passion of love. Like them, Uchida almost certainly will find herself with very different prospects for, and expectations of, intimacy as she gets older. Or, like the protagonist of Uno Chiyo's *Kōfuku* (Happiness) she may face life alone in her later years, after a youth filled with love and men. Whatever the future holds, however, her readers can rest assured that Gigi will soldier on, with Uchida there to tell (and draw) her story.

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