

Yoshinaga Fumi's *Ōoku*: Historical Imagination and the Potential of Japanese Women's Manga

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Abstract | This article analyzes three aspects of Yoshinaga Fumi's *Ōoku: The Inner Chambers*: its rereading of Japanese history from a female perspective, its reconstruction of gender relations as entertainment, and its incorporation of the legacy of girls' (*shōjo*) and Boys' Love manga. Heavily influenced by Yoshiya Nobuko's novel, *Wives of the Tokugawa Family*, *Ōoku* depicts a number of female shoguns and their male companions across generations in order to highlight the problems of the existing, oppressive social structure and portray relationships between the genders as initiated by women. A comprehensive description of the rise and fall of a female shogunate allows Yoshinaga to illustrate the transformation and reconstruction of "gender" as a social construct. This manner of storytelling is rooted in the tradition of girls' manga, which explores the use of androgynous heroines. *Ōoku* also shares much in common with Yaoi manga, which successfully explores the theme of "gender difference" in depicting male homosexuality. By blurring the conventional boundaries between girls', Yaoi, and amateur fanwork manga (*dōjinshi*) and creatively incorporating the legacies of each genre, Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* demonstrates the potential of Japanese women's manga, a feat deserving of high critical praise. In this work, Yoshinaga succeeds in adroitly challenging readers' notions of gender while remaining firmly within the bounds of popular entertainment.

Keywords | Yoshinaga Fumi, *Ōoku*, Boys' Love (BL) manga, Japanese girls' manga, gender, feminism, Yaoi, amateur fanzine (*dōjinshi*)

Introduction

In her collection of essays, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, renowned feminist activist Gloria Steinem describes a situation in which, by uniting women of the world together, an "International Revolutionary Feminist Government-in-Exile" has attained power.

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Feminists form a small international army and take over Saudi Arabia. ... We then free Saudi women from the palace women's quarters, harems, veils, and a status as chattel so complete that they are not allowed to drive cars and legally can be executed for infidelity. ... Together, we turn to the world, and say: "Now *deal*. You want this oil? Here's what you have to do for women and all your powerless groups. Here's how you redistribute your wealth, and overthrow systems based on sex, race, and class. Otherwise—no oil." (Steinem 1995, 329)

In this passage, Gloria Steinem adopts a feminist perspective to criticize the male-dominated social order, contrasting it with the manner in which women, as a minority, might be expected to drive social transformation when in power. Such a perspective remains an object of varied criticism within the feminist discipline. Without any change in the current relations of power prevalent in society, some argue, not only will a mere feminine seizure of power fail to lead to substantial social change, it may simply cause existing power relations to become more deeply entrenched.

In this context, Yoshinaga Fumi's *Ōoku: The Inner Chambers* (hereafter *Ōoku*) is quite a remarkable work. Beginning publication in June 2004 in the bimonthly girls' (*shōjo*) manga magazine entitled *Melody*, this work has been published and distributed to become widely known among manga fans in Korea, as well as in Japan. Since publication of the first collected volume in 2005, it has been the recipient of numerous awards in Japan, including the fifth Sense of Gender Award presented by the Japanese Science Fiction Association (2005), the tenth Award for Excellence in the area of Culture at the Media and Arts Festival held by the Agency for Culture Affairs (2006), the thirteenth Tezuka Osamu Cultural Grand Prize for Manga (2009), and the James Tiptree Jr. Award (2010). It has also been widely praised in the West as a work promoting gender-consciousness among the public.

Set in the early Tokugawa Shogunate, the story adopts a science fiction setting in which a strange and unknown infectious disease spreads across Japan affecting only young men, decreasing their population by one-third. Accordingly, women assume the social roles of their male counterparts, ascending even to the position of the all-powerful shogun.¹ For readers having an interest in feminism,

1. Among Japanese women's manga (*josei manga*), there are many works that reimagine history by taking famous historical figures and presenting them as women. In comparison with such manga, however, *Ōoku* stands out because it reimagines the whole of Japanese society. In other words, it depicts a society in which the essential relations of power have transformed. It is not just that women have ascended to occupy the shogunate either; they have taken control of every facet of society. Indeed, it is of particular significance that *Ōoku* depicts women taking over the leadership roles of men in various domains, such as labor and politics. This is an enormous transformation. At the very least, *Ōoku* is the first to put forward such an idea among women's manga.

such a setting may invoke the ideas introduced above in Steinem's essay. In the imaginary alternate history of Yoshinaga, in which women participate across the entire spectrum of social activity, acting as both the supremely powerful shoguns and lowly laborers, readers may anticipate an Edo society decidedly different from the male-dominated patriarchic order of official history.

Upon actually beginning to read *Ōoku*, however, such expectations may not be wholly gratified. In fact, besides the reversal in gender roles, the manga strives to adhere to a strictly factual historical representation of the Edo period. In this respect, it is an ambitious project that attempts to reread the history of the Tokugawa Shogunate from a feminine perspective. So far, this approach can be said to have worked quite well for Yoshinaga, with twelve volumes spanning the Tokugawa period up until the eleventh shogun Ienari.

Ōoku is also quite significant as a culmination of the varied style Yoshinaga is known for—she began her career creating fan works of *The Rose of Versailles* (*Berusaifu no bara*), a manga that garnered great popularity in Korea as well, and has established herself in the Boys' Love (BL), girls' and women's (*josei*) and even youth (*seinen*) manga genres. There are, however, two more bases on which one might offer *Ōoku* high critical praise. First, despite the fact that it is situated firmly within the tradition of girls' manga, sharing many elements typical to this genre, such as style, tone, and so on, it has transcended the invisible barrier between girls' and BL manga. Second, it is unique insofar as it successfully amalgamates elements from both girls' and BL manga in a manner that is not only politically correct but also exceedingly entertaining.²

From this standpoint, the current study analyzes Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* in three categories of enquiry. First, in what manner does *Ōoku* employ the genre of science fiction to present an alternate Edo history, and how might this challenge aspects of contemporary Japanese society? Second, how does it depict the changing contours of gender differences as a social construct within the historical context of a female shogunate's rise and fall? How does this demonstrate the characteristics of BL manga, a genre that specializes in playing with ideas of gender? Third, in what ways does it both reinterpret and remain faithful to the conventions of girls', women's and BL manga? Furthermore, how does this reveal the potential of Japanese women's manga as a product of popular culture, establishing feminine subjectivity in a broad sense to encompass both girls' and BL manga?

While at first these may seem like three disparate questions, they will

2. Different genres of manga, such as BL and fan-work (*dōjin*) manga, will be discussed further below.

become closely linked with one another over the course of the following analysis. This is because the manner of description and historical reinterpretation that Yoshinaga employs in *Ōoku* can be traced back to her prior work in the girls', BL, and amateur fanwork (*dōjinshi*) genres. Following that, the paper closes with an exploration of the radical connotation of Yoshinaga's "feminism."

Rereading History through "Gender Reversal": Hori's analysis

What was it I ultimately wanted to portray? Let's see, I realized I wanted to portray women working. And more than that, I wanted to portray women in power. (Yoshinaga, Miura, and Kaneda 2010, 114)

Hori Hikari analyses *Ōoku* in the context of a popular-culture movement that emerged in postwar Japan—rereading Japanese history from a feminine perspective. In order to do this, she focuses on the manner in which *Ōoku* is influenced by Yoshiya Nobuko's novel, *Wives of the Tokugawa Family* (*Tokugawa no fujintachi*), published in the 1960s. Viewed in terms of a feminist rereading of history, Hori argues, the works of Yoshiya and Yoshinaga are significantly relevant to each other (Hori 2012, 78).³

Yoshiya found herself dissatisfied with existing Japanese historical narratives, which tended to revolve around men and the shogunate, while emphasizing only the dubious characteristics of jealousy, enmity, and conspiracies to the women of the "inner chambers" (*ōoku*). Thus, she became determined to write a novel that portrayed the inner chambers in a new light, as "a place in which women of the utmost refinement gathered" (Yoshiya 1979). Her work was well received and went on to be remade into films and television dramas. Thus, it functioned as an important catalyst for the dissemination of a new image of the inner chambers in postwar Japan.

The novel features two principal protagonists. The first is Oman, a mistress of Tokugawa Iemitsu, third shogun, and the second is Emonnosuke, a court lady under Tsunayoshi, fifth shogun. These women and the shoguns do not merely engage in love-hate relationships revolving around the mundane necessity of procreation, nor do these relationships follow traditional gender roles; the women are peers of the shoguns, occasionally even leading them. In other words, these female characters advance beyond an existence merely based on ensuring the perpetuation of the dynasty through childbirth.

3. Yoshinaga actually includes Yoshiya's novel among her references listed on the final page of *Ōoku* (Hori 2012, 78).

Each of these two women ascends to the distinguished position of “grand mistress of the inner chambers” (*ōoku sō torishimariyaku*). Therein, even while accepting the affections of the shoguns, they do not content themselves in mere reproductive roles, as many of the other palace concubines do. Instead, they take charge of the administrative affairs necessary for the oversight of the women of the inner chambers. Regarding this, Hori states, “Yoshiya creates the notion of women’s history, a revolutionary attempt to offer a counter-narrative against the existing, male-dominated narrative mode of popular literature” (Hori 2012, 84).

It seems quite clear that Yoshiya’s defiant narration of a “feminine historical perspective” decisively influenced Yoshinaga’s *Ōoku*. The character most prominently featured across the twelve volumes published as of 2016 is the eighth shogun, Yoshimune, who appears in the first, seventh, and eighth volumes. While also serving as the narrator to the series’ introductory scenes, Yoshimune is the ideal representation of a powerful female shogun. Other characters just barely falling short of the same forceful presence, however, are Iemitsu and Oman (featured in vols. 2-4) and Tsunayoshi and Emonnosuke (featured in vols. 4-6), just as in Yoshiya’s novel. The relationships of these two sets of characters occupy a great portion of the overall story.

While Yoshiya and Yoshinaga each employ mediums of popular culture to convey a feminist rereading of history, the difference between these two authors lies in their treatment of the theme of procreation. In Yoshiya’s novel, Oman is freed from the feminine duty to procreate due to her infertility.⁴ In Yoshinaga’s *Ōoku*, however, the production of an heir for the preservation of the Tokugawa shogunate is the female shogun’s utmost duty, and one shared by the shogun’s male concubines residing in the inner chambers. Accordingly, upon realizing his own sterility, Oman, who is portrayed as a man in the story, endorses his favored pupil, Otama, to Iemitsu, even though doing so causes him great anguish. Emonnosuke also refuses to share a bed with Tsunayoshi of his own accord, though asserting, “No man desires the woman he loves to lay down with another.” Beginning with the third shogun, Iemitsu, and continuing all the way to the tenth shogun, Ieharu, it is a well-known historical fact that they produced relatively few heirs, compared to later shoguns from the eleventh to the last, who had a large number of heirs. By depicting the third to tenth shoguns as women, Yoshinaga deliberately overlaps the historical fact of shoguns having few heirs with the biological reality that women, unlike their male counterparts, are capable of producing fewer heirs, because of the protracted process of

4. Women of the inner chambers age thirty-five years or older were thought to be infertile and were thus forbidden from sharing the shogun’s bed any longer.

conception and pregnancy. Therefore, scenes in which the female shoguns share their beds with their lovers from the inner chambers in order to produce these heirs do little to evoke the debauchery commonly associated with the sex life of a shogun. Rather, they depict the painful political duty involved in ensuring the succession of the Tokugawa clan.

The portrayal of the female shoguns as they grapple with the task of producing an heir transcends time and setting, giving female readers cause for thought. Iemitsu, for example, must share her bed with a young man instead of her lover, who was over thirty five and thus considered infertile. Even after menopause, at the continued insistence of her father, Tsunayoshi must incessantly engage in sexual relations in order to produce an heir. And though of an inherently weak constitution, Ienobu strives to do whatever she can to ensure the continuity of her family. This anguish to resolve the tension in fulfilling both one's professional and reproductive duties is not so different from the struggles faced by women today.⁵

In this respect, the character of eighth shogun Yoshimune is quite unique. From the moment she debuts in the first volume of *Ōoku*, she maintains a neutral disposition, free of any fixation with regard to femininity and, free of any special relationship, she avails herself of men as she pleases. Yoshinaga claims that Yoshimune's story, distinct from the conventions of romantic tales of girls' manga, was influenced by the words of Ikeda Riyoko, well-known author of *The Rose of Versailles*. Upon hearing Ikeda questioning the idea that women could find lifelong happiness only in the love of a single man, Yoshinaga was determined to concoct a character like Yoshimune, unfettered by romantic love and aspiring to power.

Therefore, in examining *Ōoku's* female shoguns, two points pertaining to Yoshinaga's thematic sensibility become clear. First, there is her critical perception of the pressure inherent to the structure of society. Second, there is her description of *heterosocial* bonds between women and men transcending dimensions of procreation and sexual desire in which women can achieve an equal relationship with men by their own agency. The first aspect of this sensibility is not an issue of gender, but one pertaining to the structure of society itself. It asserts that equal relationships are impossible without overturning this

5. In reality, social pressure pertaining to unmarried women is becoming more and more pronounced in Japanese society as the population declines due to falling birth rates. As evident in the recent case of verbal sexual harassment perpetrated by Tokyo metropolitan assembly member Shiomura Ayaka, the conservative trend urging the need for greater emphasis not only on women's civic responsibility, but their reproductive duty as well, is gradually gaining momentum. For a more precise discussion of this state of affairs, see *Mainichi shinbun* (June 18, 2014).



Figure 1. Mizuno as Appears in Vol. 1.

structure. The second aspect disassociates femininity with sexual desire and procreation, establishing its relationship with masculinity as an entity complete unto itself. To be sure, this is also something possible only in such a fantastic setting.

It is particularly interesting that, whereas Iemitsu forges a deep bond with Oman through the desexualization of their relationship, Tsunayoshi forges such a bond with Emonnosuke after just a single sexual encounter, following a life replete with sexual indulgence. Nonetheless, as parents of children with other male concubines, each of these female characters unwaveringly maintains relationships with men other than their lovers. This is partially the symbolic expression of Yoshinaga's point of view that sexual desire and intercourse do not constitute the essence of a relationship, something that is often portrayed within girls' and BL manga. Rather, for these female shoguns, greater import is given to the duties of procreation and raising children. This is one aspect of *Ōoku* that ensures its readership does not merely consist of young girls, but also girls in their late teens as well as women in their twenties and beyond.

Additionally, various depictions of homosexuality between the male characters appearing in the first and second volumes of *Ōoku* not only plainly remind readers that Yoshinaga is an author of BL manga, but also of the historical existence of homosexuality among men. It is commonly known that homosexuality existed in Japan since the Sengoku (civil war) period as an

expression of devotion between master and subordinate. In the Edo period, this practice became popular among the samurai, euphemistically referred to as *shudō*, or “a way of youths.” Practitioners of Kabuki theatre, consisting entirely of men, also engaged in this custom at the time. Accordingly, readers’ familiarity with the red eyeliner worn by Mizuno, chosen for Yoshimune’s first sexual encounter in volume one, is due to the fact that such makeup was actually worn by Kabuki performers, with whom readers are already acquainted.

In currently dominant historical narratives, however, homosexuality and male eros are almost non-existent, treated only as a kind of afterthought. Nevertheless, the fact remains that *shudō* was consistently practiced in Japan for generations, and it was not until the 1920s, during the Taishō period, that it was finally discontinued. In this respect, *Ōoku*’s depiction of homosexuality is more indicative of historical fact than current prevailing historical discourse. BL manga is commonly disparaged as mere fantasy. Such fantasy, however, is often grounded in historical truth, which is marginalized by dominant historical discourse. This fact reminds one that such historical discourse itself may be grounded in male-oriented historical perspectives.

Meanwhile, the depiction of women in the position of supreme authority in *Ōoku* can also be depicted as a metaphor for debate over the “female imperial successor” currently prevalent in Japanese society. Following its defeat in World War II, Japan transitioned from an absolute to a symbolic imperial system. With his succession in 1989, Emperor Akihito has pursued a progressive course under a policy of an “open imperial household.” Such an atmosphere, however, drastically changed with the onset of the twenty-first century and outcries among right-wing conservatives with regard to the issue of the imperial succession.

Princess Aiko’s birth in December 2001 immediately sparked a heated debate over whether or not a woman might ascend to the imperial throne (Pak Chin-u 2009, 313-14). Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō responded by commissioning an “Expert Panel on Imperial Household Law” (*Kōshitsudenpan ni kansuru yūshikisha kaigi*; “Kōi keishō mondai [Heisei]”) in late 2004, which debated the possibility of revising the Imperial Household Law to allow for the accession of a female emperor. In this respect, the fact that *Ōoku* began publication in June 2004 bears considerable significance. The movement to amend the Imperial Household Law dissipated amid transforming circumstances, however, and the essential question of the succession of the Imperial Household has now fallen by the wayside. Nevertheless, in a society such as Japan’s, where the paternal imperial line has existed unbroken since “time immemorial,” the very fact that people have begun to even speak of the possibility of a female emperor is in itself quite noteworthy. *Ōoku*’s depiction of female shoguns is the fruit of just

such a social context.

The Reconstruction of Gender through the Depiction of Historical Change

While the previous section focused on a “feminist rereading of history,” the current section deals with the manner in which Yoshinaga portrays changes in gender roles as a social construction within the context of the greater historical transformation of a female shogunate. It also examines how playing with the idea of gender is related to the conventions of BL manga as a specialized genre.

First, the eight shoguns comprising the main characters of *Ōoku*'s narrative, from the third to the tenth, are presented in diverse ways, ranging from children to shrewd and elderly powerful figures. While Iemitsu, Tsunayoshi and Yoshimune are discussed above, another character worthy of mention is ninth shogun Ieshige, who pursues pleasure in an effort to overcome her preoccupation with an inborn disability. Also, there is fourth shogun Ietsuna, who is of a childlike disposition and spends her life yearning for her mother's male concubine, Oman. These and each of the other female shoguns are all simultaneously represented as authority figures and as women with varied personalities and tastes. The varied personalities of these female shoguns contain both masculine and feminine characteristics, for, as shoguns, they are endowed with “power,” a traditionally masculine attribute. Thus, Yoshinaga demonstrates how masculinity and femininity are social constructs, as well as how gender norms can be dissolved and reconstructed in various ways.

That which most effectively conveys the manner in which gender norms and one's sense of identity are constantly being reconstructed, however, is the ongoing transfiguration of “masculinity” and “femininity” that occurs over the course of the entire series. First, under the reign of third shogun Iemitsu, the masculinity of the era prior to the decimation of the male population still exists, serving as a cause for conflict between parents and children. The following conversation between a samurai and his wife, for example, pertains to the designation of their daughter as successor, since each of their sons has died:

Father: What choice did I have?! The son that was born to my concubine was struck down too by this Redface Pox! So where else should I find an heir?

Mother: Ah, but I do pity poor Shizu, I do. ... If you could have heard what she did say the other day!

Be not anxious on my count, honored mother. It doth seem that this life be more suited to me than that of a maid!

Once I did try my hand at fencing and riding, I did see I prefer the sword and horses to sewing and flower arrangement. Indeed, spending my days thus, 'tis only at that time of the month that I do recall I was born a lass! (Yoshinaga 2010, 33, emphasis in original)

Meanwhile, the common people are already adjusting to a way of life in which women compose the backbone of the labor force, and young men begin to accept such circumstances as perfectly natural. Imietsu's eventual second concubine, Sutezo, perceives such conditions as ideal, content to while away the time with women and do little in the way of work.

Sutezo: Well, dad, you ask too much of me. I've told you this many a time, but I'll say it again—*there ain't a house in all of Edo, save ours, where the son's expected to lend a hand with the family trade in this day and age, all right? And you know what? Because a son's a treasured heirloom, to be pampered and coddled so he don't get sick or die! Other folks treat a son like he's the lord shogun himself!*

Father: That's exactly what I'm calling a crying shame!

Mother: Prithree. ...

Father: Quiet, woman! ... A real man's worth lies not in being a precious stud horse, like thou dost believe, thou coxcomb! ...

Sutezo: 'Tis a good thing I was not born in your time, then, dad! (Yoshinaga 2010, 39, emphasis added)

Such strife between parents and children all but disappeared by the time eighth shogun Yoshimune takes power. With the epidemic as rampant as ever and the majority of boys failing to reach maturity, the weakness of men is now a *fait accompli*. Instead of women, it is men that require care and protection. Moreover, men must be sexually attractive in order to court the favor of women. The best they can hope for is to marry into a good family and produce many healthy children, just as women had in the past.

Yunoshin: And if I should pursue a hobby, better it be singing or dancing or some such foppish thing that'll make me popular with the ladies, is that it?

Onobu: No, of course not. I never thought anything like it! I very much like seeing you fence, sir. *Only, while 'tis true that men are stronger than women, at the same time, their constitutions are so much weaker. Should you push yourself too*

hard, I'm afraid you will get sick.

Yunoshin: Never fear. I do think I am the exception to the rule! (Yoshinaga 2009, 22, emphasis added)

Yunoshin's Mother: 'Tis not a question of how thou feelst! A man must marry into a suitable family, and there produce as many offspring as his wife can bear! That is what a man is for, and how a man shall be most fulfilled and rewarded!! (Yoshinaga 2009, 26)

This notion persists even into the reign of eleventh shogun Ienari, whereby the maternal line is broken and another paternal line finally begins. This decision of Yoshinaga's to depict a male shogun, the first in eight generations, is perhaps motivated by the historical fact that he produced fifty children in his lifetime.

Unlike his predecessor, Iemitsu, who was fully aware of the gravity of her position and worked tirelessly for the preservation of the Tokugawa Shogunate and for the peace of the realm, Ienari is firmly under the thumb of his domineering mother, Harusada, and plays little part in political affairs. Ienari comes across as a helpless lackey, forced to have sex for the purpose of procreation. Harusada, on the other hand, is the daughter of Yoshimune, who favored power over sexual relationships. She deftly renders her son a puppet with whom she can do as she pleases, effectively ruling until Ōgosho ascends to power. The following passage reflects the manner in which Harusada scolds Ienari for his growing interest in adopting a more active political role:

How many times do I have to tell you not to concern yourself with every little detail of these political matters?! *One must do what one is born to! Women are raised to work and have children, and a man like you to but serve them by fathering children!* (Yoshinaga 2014, 128-29, emphasis added)

The manner in which the men of the inner chambers are relegated to a mere reproductive role is a mirror image of historical fact; such was the fate of women in reality. Childbearing is not a woman's primary purpose, however, but merely a social role. When the relations of power have shifted, such dynamics may be applied to men in an identical manner. This is the point that Yoshinaga conveys in her portrayal of "masculinity" and "femininity" changing throughout the female shogunate, spanning from third shogun Iemitsu to eleventh shogun Ienari.

Subsequent to this epoch, as is well known, the Tokugawa Shogunate began to decline due to decadence and corruption, ending with the fifteenth shogun, Yoshinobu. In Yoshinaga's narrative, it is women that usher in Edo society's

golden age. While the way in which this age comes to a close (Harusada's episode) may seem to adhere to historical facts, one may also perhaps read this as Yoshinaga's veiled criticism of the age in which men once again gained power.

In *Ōoku*, Yoshinaga's representation of the dissolution and reconstruction of gender constitutes the most essential element of girls and BL manga, the latter of which Yoshinaga herself is one of the most prolific authors. This is directly related to what Judith Butler terms the "performativity of gender" (Butler 2008, 5). Her extensive experience working in the genres of girls' manga and BL manga enables Yoshinaga to convey in refined detail how femininity and masculinity are constantly dissolved and reconstructed.

The words "sex" and "gender" commonly signify "biological gender" and "social gender," respectively. This is the result of the painstaking efforts of feminists in the 1970s who endeavored to "distinguish between natural and socially constructed differences between the sexes" (Pae Ūn-gyōng 2004, 61). According to them, natural differences are static, but those socially and culturally constructed are subject to change. They set out to change prevailing social attitudes with this belief. While the implementation of this novel notion of gender actually played a significant role in popularizing the feminist movement, it also confronted a great deal of criticism due to its perceived oversight of the significant biological differences between men and women. Accordingly, perhaps a more appropriate conception of gender would be one transcending the idea of it as a simple social construct. Following this logic, Joan Scott asserts, "The social rules attempting to order relations between men and women within society give birth to our knowledge of sex and gender within a culture equating sex with nature" (quoted in Pae Ūn-gyōng 2004, 65).

Related to this point, the Japanese genre of girls' manga is known for anchoring its plots in romantic relationships between adolescent boys and girls and for its representations of typically feminine characters. Upon a closer reading of such manga, however, it can be said to actively pursue a diverse representation of femininity more than any other genre. Oshiyama (2007, 2) states, "One of the great accomplishments of girls manga is its ability to create compelling heroines that capture the attention of adolescent girls." Due to this fact, she adds, "Japanese girls' manga occupy a unique position as a medium representing gender."

Among such heroines represented in girls' manga, one common archetype is the "cross-dressing girl." Tezuka Osamu's *Knight of the Ribbon* (*Ribon no kishi*) is considered a seminal work in this respect. It is also not by chance that the protagonist in *The Rose of Versailles*, a masterpiece of the golden age of girls' manga in the 1970s, is a cross-dressing woman. Rather, it is due to the fact that

“girls’ manga has developed along a trajectory of repeated strange experimentation with blurring the lines between genders within the inner mind of a girl, a world where gender essentially does not exist” (Fujimoto 1998, 133; quoted in Oshiyama 2007, 2). Furthermore, Oshiyama stipulates that this practice continues the artistic traditions of Kabuki, Noh, and Takarazuka, which have long blurred the boundaries between genders.

Meanwhile, BL manga has taken this convention a step further, establishing itself as a genre specifically based on playing with ideas of gender. A genre which is gradually becoming better known in Korea too, “Boys’ Love” refers to a regularly published form of commercial Japanese manga specializing in the portrayal of homosexual relationships between men. While this term is commonly thought to have originated in the mid-1990s, the genre itself originated in the 1970s with Yaoi manga, a genre written mostly by amateur female authors who helped establish the fan fiction cultural movement which took off at the time.

Yaoi originated in amateur fan fiction depicting homosexual relationships between male characters taken from popular manga, animations and games. Its female authors refer to such works as having “no climax” (*yamanashi*), “no resolution” (*ochinashi*), and “no meaning” (*iminashi*). Mainly appearing in “fanzines” (*dōjinshi*), Yaoi garnered particular popularity among other authors and fans for its parodies of existing manga. It has greatly contributed to the growth of fanzine culture and the growing popularity of Comic Market, an event held every summer and winter attended by as many as five hundred thousand fans. These days, Yaoi has come to be known as a genre consisting mainly of parodies and fan work, while BL manga tends to be commercially published. BL manga itself, however, has been largely produced since the 1990s, when many of the authors who had contributed to the success of Yaoi in the 1980s began to make their debut as professional manga & novel writers. Therefore, the true origins of BL manga can be traced directly to Yaoi.⁶

The reason why BL manga is so groundbreaking as a genre catering to women is that, in playing with ideas of gender differences vis-à-vis homosexual relationships emphasizing homogeneity, it succeeds where many other genres have failed. Nagakubo Yōko’s critical discussion of BL novels provides an important analysis of this point. Nagakubo looks at why BL novels, targeting female readers, deal with homosexual relationships between men, as well as why, even though the characters are men, they each fulfill the masculine and feminine roles of “*seme*” (dominant, top) and “*uke*” (passive, bottom) within the

6. For a more detailed explanation of this point, see Kim Hyojin (2010).

relationship.

It is in this process of “comparison” that the influential effects of gender emerge. BL novels, for instance, employ diverse, descriptive prose to portray the masculine and feminine characteristics of *seme* and *uke*. Thus, it appears to plainly reflect prevailing notions of gender differences. In particular, with respect to sexual intercourse, *seme* “gives” and *uke* “receives.” The nature of such relations blatantly mirrors those of men and women.

Upon closer examination of the descriptive context, however, the relationship between *seme* and *uke* is not fixed, but fluid and continuous. In a relationship between “person A” and “person B,” for example, since A is “taller” and “older,” A becomes *seme* and B becomes *uke*. Furthermore, if such relations become fixed, then they will likely stay that way until the relationship ends. On the other hand, if such relations are to change, this will be caused by the arrival of “person C,” who in many cases is “taller,” “more handsome” and/or “more successful” than A. In any case, C is depicted as having more appealing masculine qualities than A. A is able to maintain his masculinity in his relationship with B, but with the appearance of an even more “masculine” C, A’s feminine qualities are brought into relief. At this point in the relational dynamics between A, B, and C, masculinity and femininity are manifest on a clear, graded scale, portrayed as relative qualities.

Regarding this dynamic, Nagakubo states, “The concept of ‘comparison’ denies a static understanding of gender differences with respect to the characters of *seme* and *uke*, offering a more flexible interpretation instead. As a result, the gender differences between *seme* and *uke* are rendered dualistic, rather than unisexual.” In the following passage, Nagakubo elaborates this argument:

Sexual homogeneity, in this case male, is actually a device necessary for bringing heterogeneity into relief. If a couple is of the same sex, such differences cannot be reduced to gender. It becomes possible to understand such difference purely as a product of personality. ... The gender differences between *seme* and *uke* are actually gender roles, or masculine and feminine roles. Since such a relationship is sexually homogeneous, each role becomes distinguishable from sexual difference. The “reader” is then able to [perceive] “masculinity” and “femininity” as roles and is free to enjoy the story. The “Yaoi Novel” allows one to take pleasure in exploring heterogeneity symbolically represented as gender. (Nagakubo 2005, 103)

This achievement of BL manga is closely related to the “androgynous” heroines of girls’ manga. Before BL manga emerged in the 1990s, these heroines existed as characters imbued with both masculine and feminine characteristics. They demonstrated to readers that gender differences were not binary and static, but

relative and dynamic. Moreover, they challenge notions of femininity in their interactions with male characters.⁷

In this respect, in diversely depicting women endowed with “power,” something traditionally considered masculine in character, Yoshinaga’s *Ōoku* illustrates the manner in which masculine and feminine characteristics can coexist. At the same time, it dissolves and reconstructs gender as a socially constructed norm in various ways.

Transcending the Boundary between Girls’ Manga and BL Manga

[There should be] a piece [or person] that might connect girls’ comics, fanzines, and BL comics. From the start, one piece was missing, but we all know that someone will emerge to make up for this in the future. We will be able to distinguish who that person is, although we can’t know for now. ... In archaeological terms, for me, the work of Yoshinaga serves as a sort of Rosetta stone for reading such works. She is as the legendary King Arthur, pulling the sword from the stone. (Fukuda 2010, 125)

This section examines the work of Yoshinaga not only as the author of *Ōoku*, but also as a writer in the genres of BL, women’s, and amateur manga. Therein, it examines the manner in which *Ōoku* successfully represents the conventions of each of these genres and how it adds to the potential of girls’ and women’s manga.

First, it is necessary to examine Yoshinaga’s works and artistic direction as a manga author. Born in 1971, Yoshinaga completed coursework for a Master’s degree in law at Keio University. Beginning in her final year of high school, she attended *dōjinshi* events like Comic Market, which represented parodies and creative amateur works dedicated to *The Rose of Versailles* and *Slam Dunk*. She continued attending such events even after making her debut as a professional manga author.

Yoshinaga began her professional career as a manga author in 1994 with a short series entitled *The Moon and Sandals* (*Tsuki to Sandaru*), which was serialized in *Hanaoto*, a BL manga magazine. This is a story about two romantic relationships, one between two male high school students and one between a

7. Of course, considering that Nagakubo’s discussion pertains to a textual analysis of BL *novels*, it is not wholly applicable to one of BL manga. On the other hand, the relevance shared by BL novels and BL manga should not be underestimated either. First, BL novels also employ illustrations in the manner of their manga counterparts. Second, both of these genres developed out of Yaoi manga.

young male high school teacher and his former male lover. Thereafter, Yoshinaga continued to work mainly in BL magazines, publishing the likes of *Truly, Kindly* (*Hontōni, yasashii*), *First Class is Civil Law* (*1-genme wa yaruki no minpō*) and *Solfège* (*Sorufēju*). Meanwhile, she began to branch out, publishing women's manga in magazines like *Wings*. A few examples of these works include *Antique Bakery* (*Seiyō kotto yōgashiten*), *All My Darling Daughters* (*Aisubeki musumetachi*) and *Flower of Life* (*Furawā obu raifu*).

Yoshinaga is a prolific and versatile artist, who may be considered both a BL and girls' manga author. She is also a participant in the amateur community, consistently attending events like Comic Market where amateur authors gather. Her versatility is manifest in works such as *Ōoku*, which began serialization in 2003 in a girls' manga magazine called *Melody*. The magazine, published since the early 2000s, targets a relatively wide audience, from high school students to young workers. *What did You Eat Yesterday?* (*Kinō nani tabeta?*), depicting a homosexual relationship between two men in their forties, began publication in 2007 to wide critical acclaim in a men's manga magazine called *Weekly Morning* (*Shūkan mōningu*).

At this point, it would be remiss to overlook the fact that Yoshinaga has not had a typical career among manga authors. In general, Japanese manga are strictly categorized into genres and carefully targeted to certain readers according to gender, age, taste, and so on, and the boundaries between these genres are not easily traversed. Therefore, what is particularly remarkable is the relationship between two genres, girls'/women's and BL manga. Not only are these two genres largely produced and read by women and girls, but they also share a common focus on romantic and emotional subjects. This is partly due to the fact that BL manga developed as a sub-genre out of girls'/women's manga. Upon closer inspection, however, one can see that there are clear divisions between artists and magazines pertaining to each of these genres. Moreover, there are clearly demarcated boundaries between the two genres themselves.

BL and girls' manga are different in terms of content, and tacit boundaries exist between the two genres. While the former portrays male homosexuality, the latter generally depicts heterosexual love stories unfolding between platonic friends. Authors who write girls'/women's manga usually do not professionally write BL manga, and authors who regularly create both BL manga and girls'/women's manga are quite rare.

This arrangement stems from the fact that BL manga is a much less prominent genre than girls' manga, read by a small number of loyal fans. Particularly in its early stages (early 1990s), BL manga's readership was largely critical of the existing genres targeting women and looked to BL manga as a

refreshing alternative. This critical mindset also served to motivate BL authors to shun association with the girls' manga genre. Competing with girls' manga magazines, prominent since the 1970s and endowed with a relatively steady supply and demand for authors, BL manga magazines at the time were continuously looking for new authors to capture a wider audience. Among the many authors who debuted in BL manga, it was not uncommon for them to venture into the genre of girls' manga after garnering popularity.

For example, Nishi Keiko and Mizushiro Setona debuted in BL manga and then moved onto girls' manga after amassing a considerable fan base. Such cases are rather typical. They, however, reject categorization as BL authors once they have begun to publish girls' manga. This appears a conscious choice in light of the fact that BL manga is a much more "specialized" genre than girls' manga, appealing to a substantially narrower readership. While some of the strict divisions between the genres began to break down in the latter part of the 2000s as the BL market underwent considerable expansion, these boundaries are nonetheless still firmly in place.

Yoshinaga is particularly unique in this regard. Without giving up her identity as a BL manga artist, not only has she expanded the essential scope of her work to encompass girls'/women's manga but also contributed to expanding readership in both genres. What is it that enables Yoshinaga to work simultaneously in both genres? One reason for this might be Yoshinaga's starting point as an author—she began creating fanzines in the 1970s for *The Rose of Versailles*, a masterpiece of Japanese manga, centering on the male and female protagonists, Andre and Lady Oscar.

As a fan of *The Rose of Versailles*, and particularly of Andre, Yoshinaga self-published parody manga collected in four fanzine volumes revolving around Andre's relationships. The narrative was particularly concerned with the romance between Andre and Lady Oscar, though it also touched on his supplementary homosexual relationships with other men. This is an especially distinctive case. As mentioned above, amateur female fanwork authors typically produce Yaoi parodies of existing manga and animations depicting homosexual relationships between the characters. Yoshinaga's well-loved work with respect to *The Rose of Versailles*, on the other hand, is qualitatively different from standard Yaoi parodies, as it pivots on the affair between female protagonist Lady Oscar and male protagonist Andre, not unlike the content of the original itself. The following passage is Yoshinaga's answer to the question of how she came to be so fond of Andre:

Andre doesn't experience any jealousy regarding someone like Oscar [the cross-



Figure 2. A Male-Attired Iemitsu and Oman

dressing female protagonist], who is a woman capable of anything. That's quite attractive. And maybe even quite foolish. ... Oscar commits herself to studying revolutionary ideas so she can participate in the French revolution, but Andre does not study at all. Because he's good, however, he follows her onto the battlefield. I like that about him. ... He's such a loveable fool. But the process by which Oscar is drawn to Andre isn't forced at all. He really comes across as a charming man. (Yuyama 2013, 197-98)

In contrast with girls' manga in which a "prince" typically commands a higher status than the female protagonist, Yoshinaga is drawn to the fact that Oscar is leading the relationship between the two protagonists, whereas Andre is merely playing a supporting role. Furthermore, while *The Rose of Versailles* is not a BL manga, despite Oscar dressing in men's clothing and performing the role of a soldier, Yoshinaga expresses her admiration for how this work "exhibits an unrestricted charm similar to that of BL." Moreover, she mentions, "My friends and I often refer to *The Rose of Versailles* as 'the BL that preceded BL'" (Yuyama 2013, 198). In short, Yoshinaga infers that her time as an amateur fanart artist for *The Rose of Versailles* allowed her to identify subtly disparate qualities inherent to this work, even while enjoying it purely as work of girls' manga. Such qualities would later become the basis for BL manga.

As Yoshinaga makes explicit, *The Rose of Versailles* has had a tremendous

influence on her work, and many scholars point out the similarities between *The Rose of Versailles* and *Ōoku*. Hori, discussed in section two, is one such scholar, particularly referencing the relationship between Iemitsu and Oman in volumes two through four. One may look to figure 2, illustrating Iemitsu dressed in male attire in order to conceal herself as a woman. The female Iemitsu gazes into the eyes of the male Oman as she holds him by the chin, as if to discern his character, while Oman adopts a passive disposition, freely offering himself to her grasp. Such a scene is reminiscent of the relationship between the cross-dressing Oscar and Andre, in which Oscar held the power. Upon ascending to the status of shogun, Iemitsu declares her intention to sacrifice herself for the preservation of the Tokugawa Shogunate. This resembles the manner in which Oscar, though a noble herself, devotes herself to the French Revolution and brings about her own untimely death. On the other hand, Oman concerns himself little with political affairs, attaching greater importance to winning the affection of Iemitsu.

Figure 2 also provides an interesting point of discussion with respect to Yoshinaga's career as an author of BL manga. The readership of *Ōoku*, currently serialized in a girl's manga magazine, can be divided into two categories, with those having read only Yoshinaga's girls' manga publications and those who have read these as well as her BL manga works. The latter are able to enjoy *Ōoku* in more ways than the former since Yoshinaga employs a variety of characteristics typical of BL manga in her depiction of inner chambers comprised of men. Situated on a premise in which "hundreds of beautiful young men are gathered in a place whence they cannot leave," the "inner chambers" are redolent of the "gymnasium" populated by beautiful young boys that featured prominently in girls' manga of the 1970s, its golden age. Particularly considering the fact that female sexuality is commonly portrayed as passive and covert while male sexuality as more active and impetuous, one might conclude that the homosexual relations between males occurring within *Ōoku* are but a perfectly natural consequence of its setting.

In particular, the story of young Mizuno in the first of volume of *Ōoku*, which describes the chain of events as he enters the inner chambers and becomes acquainted with eighth shogun Yoshimune, experiments with the entertainment potential of BL within the domain of girls' manga. Relatedly, one may infer that the world of "One Hundred Million Homosexuals" (*Ichi oku sō homo*) and "The Delightful Academy Full of Eternal Homosexuals," created by BL authors as BL became an established genre, also provide a space for the inner chambers—"a place of only young and beautiful men" (Yoshinaga 2007, 54). Despite depictions of homosexuality featured in BL manga normally being

taboo in mainstream girls'/women's manga, it appears that Yoshinaga's skillful handling of BL elements in *Ōoku* allows her to overcome this restriction.

Miura states, "*Ōoku* is a [work demonstrating] what is possible in girls' manga via traversing the genres of BL and girls' manga" (Yoshinaga 2007, 86). In the following passage Mizoguchi elaborates on this point:

If I may add an explanation to their comment, what they mean by "via BL" does not refer to the love scenes between beautiful male characters of the inner chambers. ...

Rather, in recent years the BL genre has examined the fundamental questions of sexuality, reproduction, and gender as shown above within the framework of entertaining fiction depicting sexual acts. ... Through portraying such male characters for over a decade as a BL artist, Yoshinaga has undoubtedly gained representational skills that I would liken to a well-trained musculature with a much wider mobility range than that of a regular woman. ...

Once again, I have to stress that *Ōoku* is not a BL work. ... All this does not deny the fact, though, that *Ōoku* is an offspring of BL, or rather, the larger yaoi genre, including the yaoi fanzine (*dōjinshi*) world, if we recall that Yoshinaga has been its active participant for many years.

Regarding the practice of self-publishing works in fanzines, the following analysis is possible. While there are fanzines specializing in original works, the majority focuses on fanwork pertaining to a specific, previously published manga. In other words, they are composed of parodies and derivations of well-known existing works. In this respect, Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* is simultaneously a kind of parody of girls' and BL manga, as well as a kind of grand parody of Japanese history.

As Yoshinaga puts it, "[In amateur works,] the act of deftly interweaving the various threads of the plot until the couple consummates their relationship is known as 'theory.'" She goes on to state that, "In reading a skillfully produced amateur work, one is persuaded to support the consummation of the couple's relationship, or perhaps another fanzine emerges with a new way of interpreting their relationship, causing a stir in the genre. It's kind of like archaeology" (Yoshinaga 2007, 166). If engaging in the publication of amateur works is 'archaeological,' then one can say that Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* is a parody of Japanese history, as well as her own work of amateur manga, through which she puts forth her own theory. It is well known, in fact, that Yoshinaga claims to have based the history in *Ōoku* on a history from Yamakawa Publishing Company, renowned in Japan for historical textbooks. If one approaches *Ōoku* for the first time with no prior knowledge of Japanese history, it is not entirely impossible that, taken in by the historical detail and elaborate composition, he or she might

come to believe that much of the Edo period was actually ruled by a female shogunate.

Conclusion: Yoshinaga's "Feminism" and *Ōoku*

Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* is a reimagining of Edo history, as well as a work of entertainment. By closely resonating with the contradictions inherent in the male dominated society faced by Japanese women today, not only has it procured critical acclaim, but widespread popularity as well. Overall, one can say that it is a work worthy of critical praise based on its re-reading of Japanese history from a female perspective, reconstruction of gender relations as entertainment, and incorporation of the legacies of BL and girls' manga.

These are not achievements that have come about by chance. Indeed, Yoshinaga is one of those female manga authors belonging to a minority explicitly acknowledging themselves as feminists. What is particularly noteworthy about this fact, however, is that Yoshinaga did not disclose her views on feminism to the public until the 2000s, after she had already become famous, even though she admits to having had such views since her teens. While this is partly reflective of the fact that feminism has a largely negative connotation in Japanese society, one can also say that her long term silence on the subject reflects the belief of the majority of Japanese women that feminism is an ideology remote from their daily lives. On this subject, Yoshinaga states the following:

When I speak of feminism, I'm absolutely speaking of my own personal definition of it. I'm not skeptical of the institution of marriage, but my idea of feminism imagines a society that would see a woman endowed with the necessary financial independence to be able to leave her husband if she came to realize she'd made a mistake in marrying him. (Yoshinaga 2007, 168)

At a glance, this statement may seem rather moderate. By emphasizing that she is not opposed to the institution of marriage per se, she manifests her intention to distance herself from radical feminism as an author of popular women's manga. Her attempt to differentiate between her own definition of feminism and the prevailing ideas, even while referring to herself as a feminist, also suggests an effort to find a moderately realistic compromise.

Is this truly the case? It would seem not. Rather, the words of Yoshinaga cited above indicate one who must endear herself to the public as an author of a popular genre. One may interpret the "feminism" represented in her work, on the other hand, as that which is much more persuasive and radical than any

purely academic form of feminism.

The fact that Yoshinaga has declared *Ōoku* to be her first and last work concerning heterosexual romance and that her latest work is about a gay couple in their forties tacitly connotes a more radical kind of feminism, rather than one in accordance with “moderate” feminism. While she claims that she is “not skeptical of the institution of marriage,” the reality is that wives actually endowed with the “financial independence to escape unfortunate marriages” still constitute an extreme minority. This signifies the painful truth that, even in a modern society where the rights and interests of women have greatly improved, the basic human right of a woman to be treated as equal to a man is not yet ensured. To gain a more palpable sense of this situation, one may again look to the words of Yoshinaga:

I used to think there was no way I could possibly portray anything to do with feminism in manga, but in writing about women, ultimately, there’s no way to get around it. So that’s why I’ve avoided depicting love stories between men and women until now. (Yoshinaga 2007)

Regarding the opinion that “[*Ōoku*] is quite impressive as a work of history, but it’s also a portrayal of feminine-masculine role reversal, and even more so, it’s a full-fledged girls’ manga love story,” she also states the following:

This has been said by people before, but I’ve come to realize the sad fact that I simply can’t write a “boy-meets-girl” romance without distorting the real world to the degree that I do. (Yoshinaga 2010, 114)

Yoshinaga confesses that she avoided creating work about men and women since she could not avoid the subject of feminism, and that only in an imaginary fantasy such as that of her alternate Edo history, in which feminine and masculine roles are reversed, could she truly depict the kind of heterosexual romance she desired to. These confessions reveal that it is all but impossible to portray equal and politically correct relationships between men and women set in contemporary society. In other words, Yoshinaga connotes a critical perspective asserting that it would be deceitful to portray heterosexual romance under such oppressive circumstances.

Yoshinaga’s alternate Edo history, in which the positions of men and women are reversed, is not portrayed as a utopia. This reflects her awareness of the prevailing social reality. While her Edo society is one in which women have become breadwinners as a result of the diminished male population, it is also one in which men are as valued as ever, and excepting women of the upper

class, it is a struggle to produce children, let alone find a husband. Through this narrative, Yoshinaga asserts the idea that, even in a society in which masculine and feminine roles are reversed, without change in the structure of society itself, any fundamental change in gender roles is all but impossible. This idea functions as a piercing social criticism. Modern society, as well as imaginary Edo society, each fail to provide conditions in which women may love and marry as equals and in which they are endowed with the financial capability to freely withdraw from this arrangement, should they feel it necessary.

Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* is, in this regard, a work that successfully conveys the most radical form of feminine consciousness realized by Japanese women's manga in its most popular form. It must also be emphasized that this achievement is based on the long tradition of girls' and women's manga playing with ideas of gender. Just as Nietzsche discussed the superiority of art over scholarship (truth) (Nietzsche 1999), as a work of popular art, Yoshinaga's *Ōoku* unveils a realistic, living, and breathing world, imbued with the gender consciousness of the common woman.

• Translated by Keiran MACRAE

Acknowledgements | This article is the translated version of the author's Korean article, "Yosinaga Humi ūi 'Ooku': yöksachök sangsangnyök kwa yösöng manhwa ūi kanüngsöng," published in *Ilbon pip'yöng* [Korean Journal of Japanese Studies] 11 (2014), with the permission of Söul Taehakkyo Ilbon Yönguso [Institute for Japanese Studies, Seoul National University]. The translation of this article was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant, funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2008-362-B00006).

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