

GIRLS'

THE 'FABULOUS YEAR 24 GROUP' & THE SHŌJO MANGA REVOLUTION

WORLD

ZOE TAYLOR tells the extraordinary story of a group of pioneering young Japanese women who reshaped the comics industry and the wider culture, challenged inherited ideas of gender and revolutionised visual storytelling. Taylor also interviews **MATT THORN**, whose English translations became a vehicle for popularising the work



Fushi no Hana (An Immortal Flower), Yukiko Kai, 1979

Huge twinkling eyes, splintered panels, abstract page layouts, androgynous boys, flowing hair, stars, flowers and melancholic longing...

These distinctive features of *shōjo* manga – Japanese comics aimed at junior and high school girls – crystallised in the early 1970s when ‘the Fabulous Year 24 Group’, the first wave of women artists working in the genre, elevated it to a new cultural prominence. Exploring philosophical, psychological and previously taboo themes with a unique sense of lyricism, they revolutionised the medium in works such as Moto Hagio’s *The Heart of Thomas* (1974-75) and Keiko Takemiya’s *The Song of the Wind and Trees* (1976-84). As the cultural studies researcher Deborah Shamoon notes, some have described this change as, “analogous in importance and scope to the discovery of interiority in early Meiji fiction”, while others have compared the Year 24 Group to ‘the New Wave in cinema’.

This New Wave took the genre to new heights of popularity. Riyoko Ikeda’s *The Rose of Versailles* (1972-73), set in the run-up to the French Revolution, sold 12 million copies in Japan alone and created a boom in the study of French and holidays to Versailles. Shamoon writes in her study *Passionate Friendship: the Aesthetics of Girls Culture in Japan*, that upon the death of its main character, Oscar – a girl raised as a man – teachers had to suspend classes because so many of the girl students were in tears.

Since the 1970s, women have been the major producers of *shōjo* manga, a field originally dominated by young, male artists. It has grown to become a major cultural force in Japan, inspiring anime (such as *Sailor Moon*), TV series (*Hanazakari no Kimitsuchi e*), films (*Hana Yori Dango*) and novels (the work of Banana Yoshimoto). Dirk Deppey of *The Comics Journal* considers the genre to be, “one of the most graphically adventurous schools of cartooning you’ll find anywhere in the world. *Shōjo* manga creators have searched for the most intuitive ways to depict conversation, emotional states and human nature in graphic form, and their success in developing a visual language sufficient to reaching these lofty goals has been nothing short of astonishing.”

Take, for example, a page from *The Heart of Thomas* (page 41), in which traumatic memories of abuse, heightened by expressive speech bubbles and painful bursts of light, are juxtaposed with the ghostly face of Thomas Werner – a boy who committed suicide for love – emerging from sweeps of delicate, watery lines. *The Heart of Thomas* is the *shōjo* classic that has perhaps received the most academic attention in the West (although it didn’t appear in translation until 2012) and is an early example of the *shōnen-ai* – or ‘boys’ love’ – genre, which focuses on romantic and often tragic love between male teenagers.

Inspired by writers such as Herman Hesse, Isaac Asimov and Ursula Le Guin, as well as films such as *Death in Venice* and *2001: a Space Odyssey*, Hagio has written lengthy works in several genres (including groundbreaking science-fiction comics) and often explores issues of difficult family life. *Otherworld Barbara* is the next of her works to be released in translation by Fantagraphics: the story begins with a girl in a coma who appears to have killed both of her parents and eaten their hearts.

The *shōjo* comics of the Year 24 Group were primarily concerned with the emotions and inner life of the characters, an aspect that was heightened by major formal innovations such as the fragmented interior monologue. The abstract page compositions – which make liberal use of diagonal lines and montage-like arrangements – have been compared to Soviet Constructivist posters. Facial close-ups and action shots are densely layered with emotive shapes, allegorical imagery, expressive marks, psychedelic patterns, starbursts and screen tone, suggesting moments of melodramatic intensity.

The Year 24 Group’s name refers to the 24th year of the Showa era (1949), which approximates the birth dates of the young women pioneers. It wasn’t a title that its members gave themselves and nor were they a coherent group: according to the translator Matt Thorn, the term includes anyone who contributed to the *shōjo* manga revolution. But Moto Hagio, Keiko Takemiya and Yumiko Oshima are always acknowledged as among the movement’s most significant artists. Born in the aftermath of the Second World War, these women grew up against the backdrop of the global youth counterculture of the 1960s and sought to transform manga into a new form of self-expression for women.

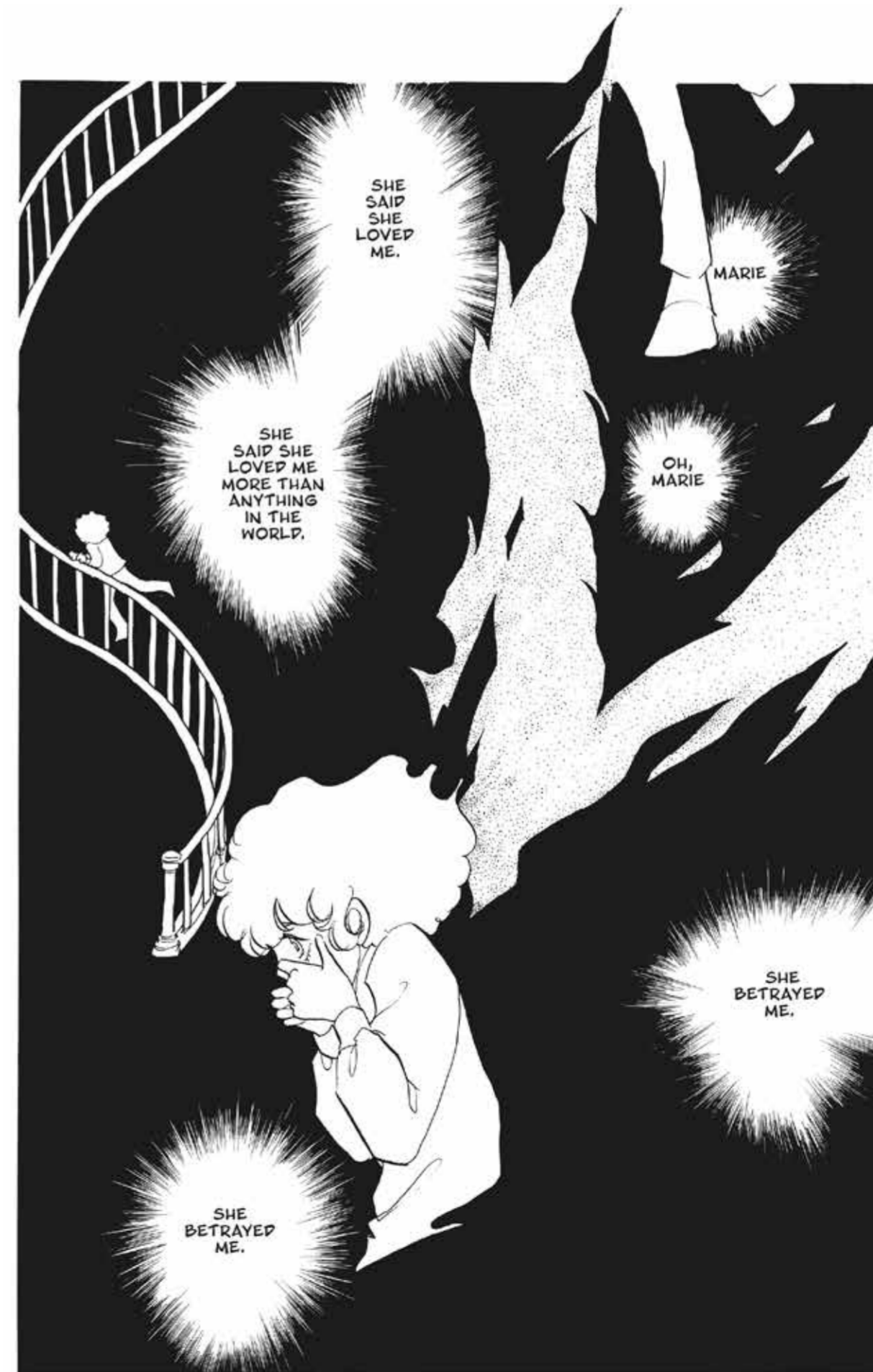
Not all *shōjo* manga artists of the time were creating such ambitious works – many followed the trend for simpler girl-boy school romances that emerged in the mid-1960s. These earlier school romances attracted a new



Bara no Toge (The Rose's Thorn), Keiko Takemiya, 2000

One of the most graphically adventurous schools of cartooning you'll find anywhere in the world

So, in a sense, the revolutionaries were not only the artists, but also the new generation of avid reader fans



The Heart of Thomas, Moto Hagio, 1974-75

audience of teenagers to *shōjo* manga (it was previously aimed only at elementary school girls), which allowed the Year 24 Group artists to explore more complex themes such as sexual abuse and abortion and, with their open approach to gender and sexuality, paved the way for genres such as *yuri* ('Girls' Love') and *shōnen-ai*.

THE ORIGINS

Shōjo manga magazines such as *Ribon* began appearing in the 1950s and 1960s. Their precursors, the pre-war illustrated literary magazines, had promoted a nationwide reading community of girls. Shamoon writes of how this idea returned in the 1970s in the form of “prizes, contests [and] requests for pen pals, usually for other girls in the same grade at school”. Articles about movie stars were replaced by those about popular manga artists and, “fandom became a means of connecting with other girl readers and with young women artists... The Year 24 Group, because of their youth and willingness to connect with fans, were the first to create this girls’ manga culture.” So, in a sense, the revolutionaries were not only the artists, but also the new generation of avid reader fans.

Many girls started writing comics while still at school and submitting work to the *mangaka* (‘comic artist’) contests, which major publishing houses such as Kodanasha started to run in the mid-1960s. According to Moto Hagio, several Year 24 Group artists made their debut in these competitions. First published at 16, some became established *mangaka* by their early twenties.

A comics craze was under way and manga magazines of all types were on the lookout for new talent. This is one reason why women were able to take over *shōjo* manga – the young men who had previously made stories for girls rushed to fill the demand for *shōnen* (‘young boys’) manga.

There were also commercial imperatives that allowed the members of the Year 24 Group to establish themselves. Their entrance into the world of professional manga publishing, Shamoon explains, involved, “a recognition by (male) editors that stories penned by female artists were and still are more popular with girl readers than works by male artists and hence more profitable.”

One editor-in-chief was of particular importance. Thorn calls Junya Yamamoto, “the invisible member of the Year 24 Group.” Despite pressure from his publishing house, Special Edition Girls’ Comic, Yamamoto, “published one unconventional, controversial story after another, for no other reason than they were interesting and well executed,” writes Thorn in *Something for Girls*, a feature for *Japan Quarterly*. “He brought so much of their work to the light of day. What any other editor would have seen as flaws in these young artists, Yamamoto saw an enormous potential.”

Moto Hagio describes Yamamoto as a fan of the male-dominated alternative manga journal *GARO* but, “even so, he believed that girls’ comics had something to offer. What I admire about him is that he went to the trouble to ask a lot of different people about the genre. He tried to understand just what girls’ comics were about.”

GARO, which was founded in 1964, encouraged artistic freedom. Popular with the student movement, it favoured political and unconventional works that would not have been published elsewhere. Three years later, Osamu Tezuka – often called ‘the god of manga’ – started his own alternative manga magazine, *COM*, which was aimed at slightly younger readers and sought submissions from female artists. (It even hosted roundtable discussions on *shōjo* manga.) Avant-garde female artists such as Fumiko Okada debuted there in the late 1960s and helped pave the way for the experimentation of the Year 24 Group.

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS AND THEMES

By the end of that decade, boys’ comics had become grittier and were dealing with issues such as the psychological or sexual alienation of young men in contemporary Japanese society. *Shōjo* manga took a few more years to mature but the developments that eventually came are considered to be some of the most significant and exciting in Japanese comics of the time.

Hagio devoured comics and read both *GARO* and *COM* – although she wasn’t a fan of the former, with its darker settings and more realistic styles. As she explained to Thorn, “I had no patience at all for realistic works. I think the reason was that I grew up in a coal-mining town... It was a reality of violence and poverty and I wanted to escape from it. I wanted to move towards something more beautiful.” An earlier pioneer, Eiko Hanamura, was attracted by a similar sense of escapism. At a recent talk in London, she said, “I think *shōjo* manga was born out of a ➤

longing for something you didn't have."

Whereas boys' comics addressed the problems of post-war Japan more directly, girls' comics tended to create idealised, alternative realities, with a visual style that evoked wonder.

The innovations of the Year 24 Group were spurred by the late 1960s counterculture and the spirit of experimentation in Japanese comics at the time, but they were also building on pre-existing conventions. Shamoan argues that we can only understand the *shōjo* manga revolution in the context of a discrete girls' culture that had been emerging and developing since the early 20th century, when the education system became gender-divided and girls' magazines emerged to encourage literacy.

In pre-war Japan, entertainment for girls was centred around literary publications and the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical theatre troupe (based on the original model of kabuki before 1629, when women were banned). Shamoan suggests that the interest in gender-shifting masquerade still present in girls' culture has its roots here, while the same-sex love themes originated in the 'S relationship' – 'spiritual' or platonic love between an older and a younger girl at school – which was a popular focus of the stories in pre-war literary magazines.

Inspired by this idea of spiritual love (an idea imported by Christian missionaries who set up schools in the early Meiji period), S relationships were encouraged as a way of diverting young girls' romantic attentions from boys – depictions of romance between boys and girls were taboo within girls' literature (the term *shōjo* carries connotations of cloistered maidenhood). According to Shamoan, Year 24 Group artists such as Hagio drew on this tradition but switched the gender; she convincingly interprets *The Heart of Thomas* as, "a girl's novel about S relationships, with boys substituted for girls." Takemiya's *The Song of the Wind and Trees* – also set in a European boys' boarding school – takes a similar approach but introduces much more sexually explicit imagery, while exploring themes such as racism and drug abuse.

VISUAL LYRICISM

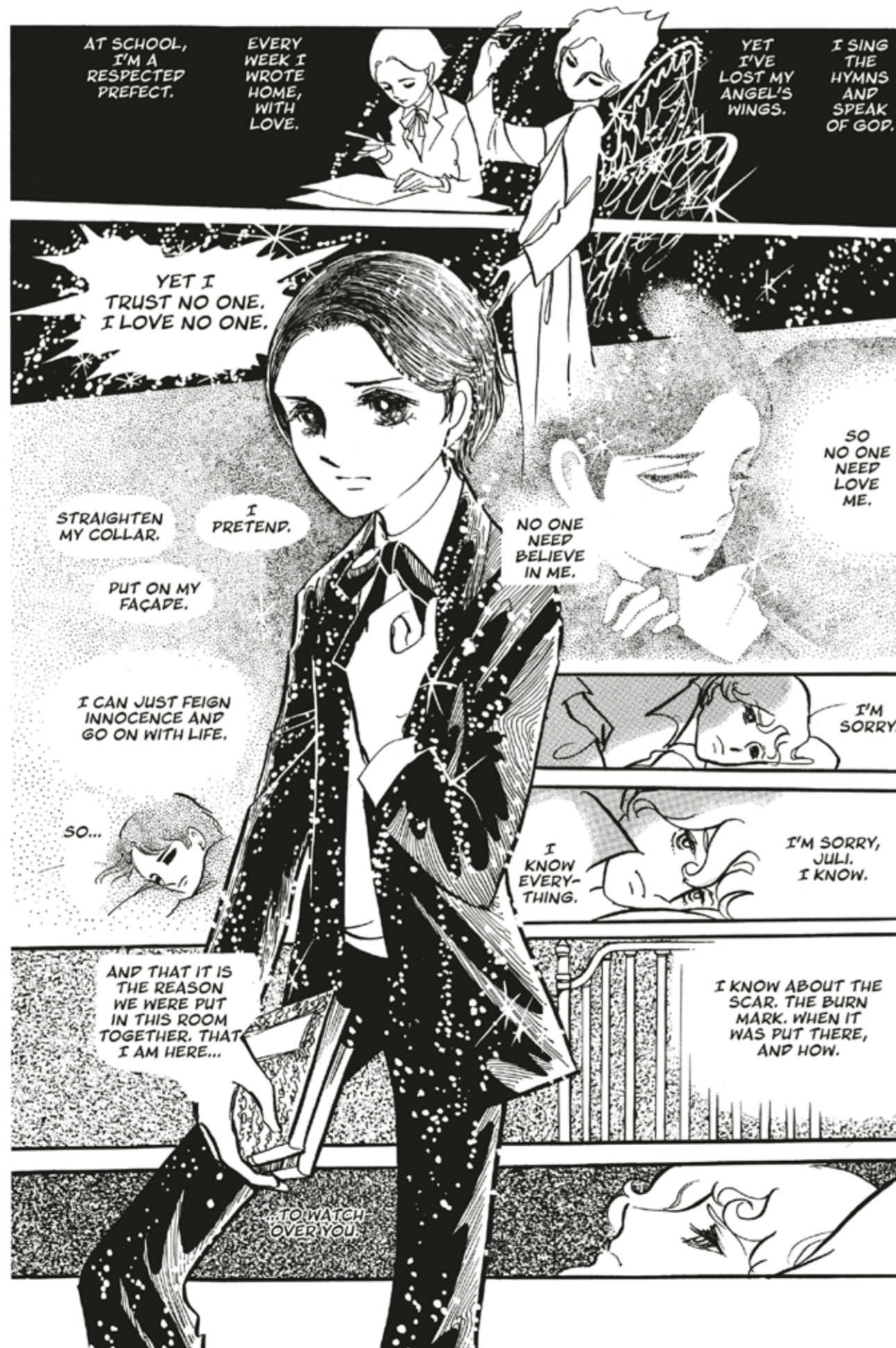
The decorative illustrations and dreamy *jojoga* (lyrical pictures) that had been developing in girls' magazines since the 1920s also influenced manga. The art nouveau and art deco-inspired fashion drawings of Jun'ichi Nakahara, with their elongated limbs and huge, long-lashed, doll-like eyes, were popular with teenage girls (Nakahara was also an amateur doll-maker). According to Thorn, when Yoshiko Nishitani wrote some of the first boy-girl school romances in the mid-1960s, she drew her characters in this style, which quickly became the convention.

The manga historian Yukari Fujimoto writes that the exaggerated twinkling eye (which expresses emotion and encourages reader identification) was popularised by Macoto Takahashi in the early *shōjo* manga of the 1950s. Also inspired by Nakahara's lyrical illustrations, he drew his characters with huge eyes and filled them with glittering stars. Others have attributed the exaggerated eye to Tezuka, who produced the first long *shōjo* manga, *Princess Knight* in 1953. Many Western writers assume that he was influenced by Disney, but Tezuka himself said that he was inspired by the eye make-up of the Takarazuka Revue performers, who were based in his hometown.

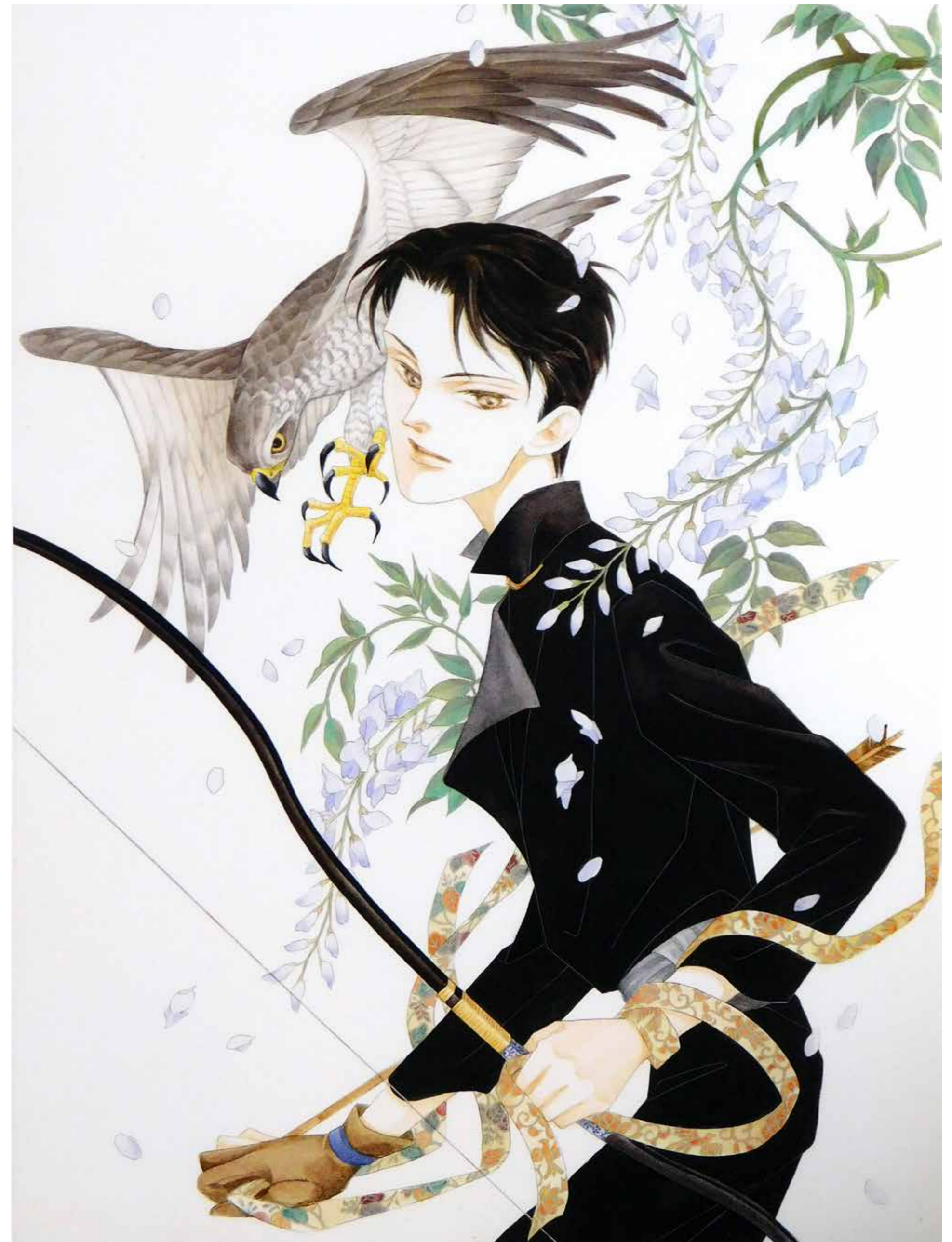
Before writing manga for girls' magazines in the mid-1950s, Takahashi was an illustrator for the highly decorative picture-story genre. He brought this style of narration – using atmospheric images that conveyed the protagonists' unspoken thoughts – to make emotive manga, such as *Cherry Row* (1957), that manipulated layouts to emphasise beauty, mood and fashion over plot. The Year 24 Group took Takahashi's approach and transformed it into what Fujimoto describes as a form that is 'ideally suited to the portrayal of character psychology and of an unconscious that cannot be expressed in words'.

Shōjo manga became popular in the West in the 1990s after the arrival of the anime series *Sailor Moon*, based on Naoko Takeuchi's manga *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon*. It sparked the American interest in anime, as well as inspiring a generation of girls to start reading Japanese comics. Deppey writes: 'With its whimsical sense of fashion, thrilling adventure and complex backstory, *Sailor Moon* was like little else young girls had ever seen before on television.' Although the English-translated *shōjo* manga market is still tentative, popular contemporary works have found a readership in the US. ➔

What the Year 24 Group achieved was universal and not exclusively gendered



The Heart of Thomas, Moto Hagio, 1974-75



Cover for *Nemuki* magazine, Akiko Hatsu, 2001

However, very little is known in the West about the Year 24 Group and other early pioneers of the genre. Matt Thorn's 21st-century translations of some of Hagio's *shōjo* manga for Fantagraphics are changing that, and a touring exhibition, 'Shōjo Manga: the World of Japanese Girls' Comics', is celebrating some of the innovators.

The condensed version of the exhibition, at the House of Illustration in London until 12 June, shows the work of Keiko Takemiya, a Year 24 Group member who invented *shōnen-ai* with Moto Hagio; Yukiko Kai, a later 1970s artist; and her younger sister, Akiko Hatsu, a self-publisher who worked as an assistant to Hagio and together with Yasuko Sakata coined the term *yaoi* – a more sexually explicit form of the boys' love genre. Although the show is limited (it is light on context and prioritises lavish colour illustrations over the comics themselves), the fact that it is being held at all suggests a gradual increase in awareness of the movement.

Shōjo manga has been a cultural force in Japan since the 1970s and is a major export, whether in the form of comics or TV and anime adaptations. To Shamoon, this suggests that the genre speaks to the desires of girls beyond national (and to some extent cultural) boundaries, and that, 'girls are eager for narratives that reflect their point of view'. But although the Year 24 Group's most significant legacy is often considered to be the way in which it helped girls in Japan take charge of their own image and entertainment, what it achieved was universal and not exclusively gendered. Many of its members are still active today and their work continues to inspire both men and women of all ages.

'Shōjo Manga: The World of Japanese Girls' Comics' is showing at the House of Illustration, London, until 12 June.

Thanks to Fantagraphics Books and The House of Illustration.

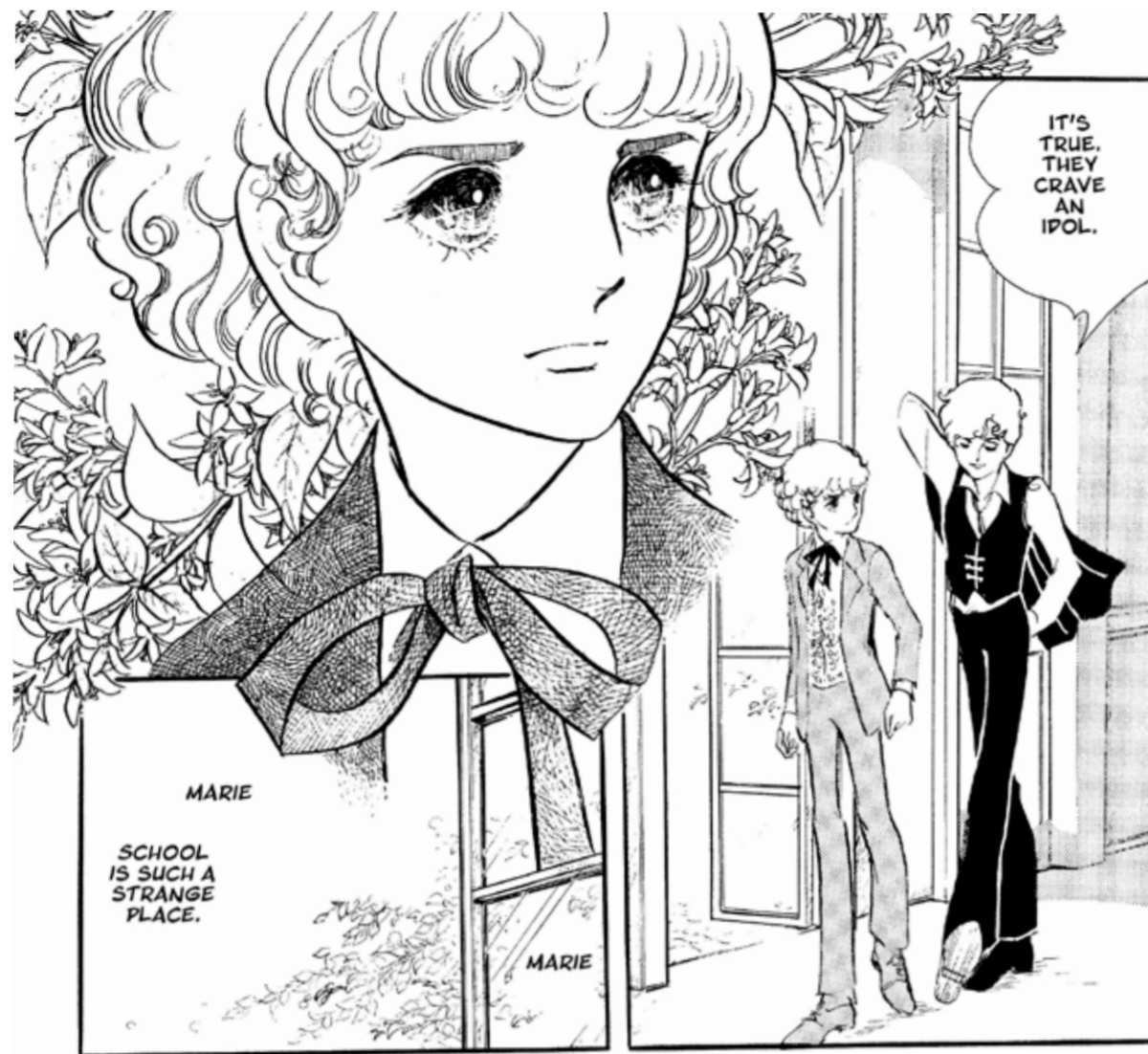
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Deborah Shamoon, *Passionate Friendship: the Aesthetics of Girls Culture in Japan*

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The Comics Journal no. 269: Shōjo Manga Issue

Matt Thorn, 'Something for Girls', *Japan Quarterly*, vol 48, issue 3



Shōjo manga has been a cultural force in Japan since the 1970s



Above and below: *The Heart of Thomas*, Moto Hagio, 1974-75

A form that is ideally suited to the portrayal of character psychology and of an unconscious that cannot be expressed in words



The Heart of Thomas, Moto Hagio, 1974-75

INTERVIEW with MATT THORN

The translator and cultural anthropologist Matt Thorn is an associate professor in the faculty of manga at Kyoto Seika University in Japan. She is currently editing a line of manga for Fantagraphics.

ZOE TAYLOR: How would you explain the sudden interest in *shōjo* manga in the US in the late 1990s? I'm thinking of the success of the *Sailor Moon* anime, for instance, and your translation of *Four Shōjo Stories*, which was published in 1996.

MATT THORN: Before *Sailor Moon* came to the US (and finally succeeded after an initial false start), the conventional wisdom among the people in the toy and entertainment industry was that little girls wanted only fluffy, ultra-cute, strictly non-violent entertainment and that they stopped watching animation or (heaven forbid) reading comics by the age of ten or so. *Sailor Moon* turned that conventional wisdom on its head and did what I had been trying for several years to do: make *shōjo* manga popular with mainstream American girls and (eventually) women. I had been trying a top-down approach, translating titles that were sophisticated and geared more at women than at girls. Tokyo Pop (the publishers of the *Sailor Moon* manga) took the opposite approach, going after children who had not yet developed preconceptions of how girls should (or rather, should not) relate to animation and comics. I was trying to convert adults; they simply created a new generation that was open to the idea of comics and animation for girls.

ZT: Since then, has the work of the Year 24 Group become better known in the West?

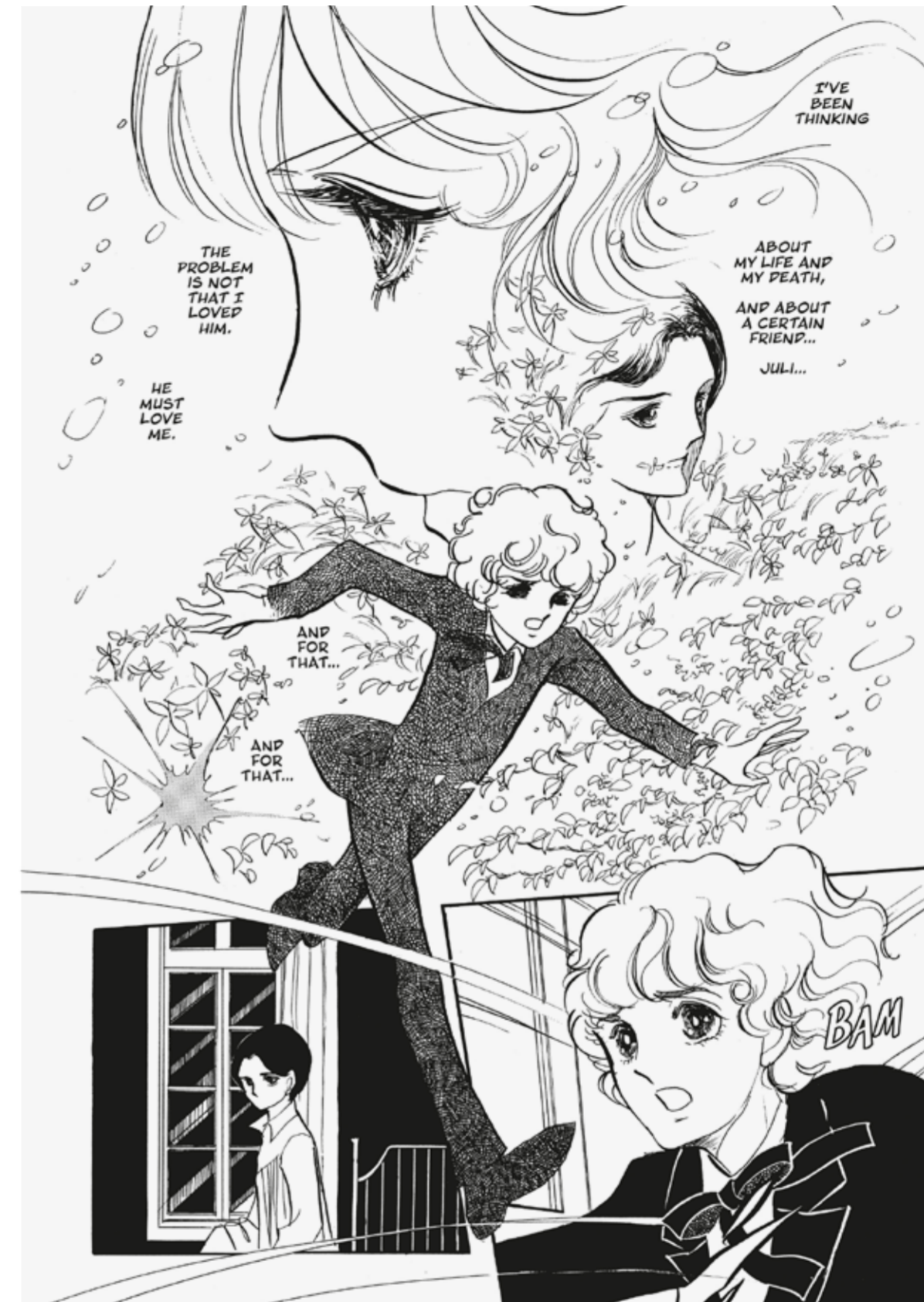
MT: More fans are aware of the existence of the Year 24 Group than when I started evangelising back around 1993, but it remains the case that you can only read most of the manga those women produced in the original Japanese or in sketchy unauthorised translations. Sadly, there have been few authorised translations. Publishers are justifiably wary of translating 'classics' that may or may not appeal to wide audiences in the English-speaking world. There's still a long slog ahead.

ZT: It was reading Moto Hagio's *The Heart of Thomas* as an exchange student in the 1980s that inspired you to become a translator and you were finally able to release an edition of that work with Fantagraphics in 2012. Why did it take so long for it to appear in English?

MT: When I applied to *Viz* for translating work back in 1989, I sent them my translation of a short story from Moto Hagio's teen vampire series *The Poe Clan*. I was pushing *shōjo* manga to them from the start but they were having a hard enough time even getting boys to read translated manga, and female readers were believed to be almost non-existent. And when I started my work with Fantagraphics, it just took a really, really long time to get from conception to execution. =>



Lovers of Babylon, Akiko Hatsu, 1996



The Heart of Thomas, Moto Hagio, 1974-75

The Year 24 Group artists reflected the interests of then-young women of their generation

ZF: What do you feel is the most significant achievement of the Year 24 Group?

MT: The biggest achievement by far, in my opinion, is proving that you could have a popular entertainment form geared at girls and women that was actually created almost entirely by women. Even Europeans and Americans are not there yet, with the sole exception of young adult novels. It was a genuine flood of women artists into a field that had been utterly dominated by men. Before 1969, you could count on the fingers of two hands the number of women cartoonists working in commercial magazines. (There were more women artists in the much funkier field of 'rental manga', but that's another story.) Today, a girl who wants to become a cartoonist doesn't even have to think about the possibility of being rejected because of her gender.

ZF: How would you explain the interest in gender and sexuality that pervaded their work?

MT: The Year 24 Group artists reflected the interests of then-young women of their generation. They were Baby Boomers, and had an interest in politics and social issues that later generations have not. 'Women's Lib' was something they thought about and discussed seriously. They were frustrated and angry with a society that provided women with only a handful of acceptable life courses to choose from. They wanted to shake that up, or better yet smash it, and I think you could argue that they succeeded in some ways. They opened Pandora's Box, and while Japanese patriarchy has fought against progress tooth and nail, Japanese women today have seen an alternative reality and cannot forget it. It was the Year 24 Group that showed them that alternative reality.

ZF: Science fiction was also a popular theme within their work. Were they pioneers of this genre?

MT: They were pioneers, yes. I suppose the alternative reality they wanted to portray was so far from daily reality that it could only be set in the distant future or another dimension, or brought into being through magic or alien intervention.

ZF: And were the Year 24 Group artists consciously collaborating to revolutionise *shōjo* manga? Were they influencing each other?

MT: Oh, yes, they influenced each enormously. Moto Hagio and Keiko Takemiya were actually roommates for a couple of years, and several other *shōjo* manga artists regularly visited them at what came to be known (tongue-in-cheek) as the Ōizumi Salon.

They helped each other meet their deadlines. And they were very consciously trying to revolutionise *shōjo* manga. They used that word, 'revolution' (*kakumei*). They continue to influence young artists today. In fact, women in their early twenties are even more influenced by the Year 24 Group than are women cartoonists in their thirties, because of the influence of their mothers. Many of my cartooning students who are women are very familiar with the Year 24 Group, because they have seen their work on their mothers' bookshelves since they were babies. !

Moto Hagio's Otherworld Barbara, translated by Matt Thorn, will be released by Fantagraphics Books this September.