***Collective Gender Fictions and the Takarazuka Revue***

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**Abstract**
As a unique all-female musical company founded in 1914, the Takarazuka Revue provides significant insights into Japanese fan culture. In the Revue, *otokoyaku* (i.e., the women who perform male roles) perform heterosexual love stories on the stage. However, little attention has been paid to the fact that the *otokoyaku* also wear men's clothing in their off-stage life and behave like men—at least visually—as if there is no performative distinction between their on- and off-stage lives. Leonie Strickland observes that *otokoyaku* can usefully be understood by looking at the three spheres in which they perform, that is, in their on-stage, off-stage, and private spheres, and that only in the private sphere do the *otokoyaku* return to who they are. However, I argue that the relationship between these three spheres is more complex because the gender fictions are not authored by the performers alone. In this paper, I want to propose the concept of "collective gender fictions," by which I refer to the (pseudo-heterosexual) gender narratives created over time within an imaginary female community that contains predominantly female fans. These collective gender fictions are often invisible and even illegible to those outside the community but have more subversive potential than generally assumed.

Keywords: Cross-Dressing, Fan Culture, Collective Gender Fictions

## Introduction

As a unique all-female musical company founded in 1914, the Takarazuka Revue provides important insights into Japanese fan culture. The most popular performers are *otokoyaku* (i.e., the women who perform male roles) who perform gender fictions on the stage to enact heterosexual love stories. These actresses wear male costumes and play male roles in a wide variety of theatrical plays, including Romeo Montague in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. However, little attention has been paid to the fact that *otokoyaku* also wear men's clothing in their off-stage life and behave like men—at least visually—in their daily life as if there is no performative distinction between their on- and off-stage lives.

Historian Leonie Strickland (2008) observes that *otokoyaku* can usefully be understood by looking at the three spheres in which they perform: namely, the on-stage, off-stage, and private spheres (p.112). Strickland asserts that *otokoyaku* perform male gender roles in the theater as well as in public. Only in the private sphere do the *otokoyaku* return to who they are in terms of their biological sex (Strickland, 2008, p. 112). However, I argue that the relationship between these three spheres is more complex because the fiction of masculine gender, for which the Takarazuka Revue is famed, is not authored by the performers alone. Hence, I propose the concept of "collective gender fictions," by which I refer to the (pseudo-heterosexual) gender narratives created over time within an imaginary female community that contains predominantly female fans. These collective gender fictions are often invisible and even illegible to those outside the community but have subversive potential to undermine traditional male-centered values.

I suggest that the collective gender fictions performed by the Takarazuka Revue are more pervasive and deep-rooted in history than they may seem initially, although they are certainly a cultural work of the (predominantly) female imagination. This paper traces the "origin" and development of collective gender fictions through an analysis of fan letters and photographs from the 1920s to the 1940s in the Takarazuka archives.

## Fans and the Takarazuka Revue in the 1920s

When the Takarazuka Revue was founded in 1914, all its actresses were approximately 15 years old and there were virtually no adult actresses. Hence, the Takarazuka Revue in the early days resembled girls' school plays. As it was an all-female theater company, the actresses played the on-stage roles of both men and boys. However, this does not mean that there were two distinct roles for what we now call *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* (i.e., female roles) from the outset. Each Takarazuka actress was expected to play both male and female stage roles.

A 1919 photograph of Takarazuka actresses shows that there was no distinction created between *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* in the off-stage sphere (Figure 1). All Takarazuka actresses wore kimonos and had long hair in traditional Japanese hairstyles.

**Figure 1.** Takarazuka actresses in 1919 (Kobayashi,1923, p. 13)

Likewise, fan letters suggest that the fans did not differentiate between their favorite actresses based on whether they performed male or female roles, although their reaction toward the performances by Takarazuka actresses reveals that some fans projected their ideal male gender onto their favorite actresses, which can be seen in the earliest female fan letters to Takarazuka actresses, which were most likely written in the 1920s.

Everyone who has seen the Takarazuka Revue admires your voice and technique. And they look up to you. Ms. Taeko, you are not the queen of Takarazuka, but the king (Kawahara, 1922, p.24; my translation).

This fan letter is particularly noteworthy because the writer describes her favorite Takarazuka actress as a king, not a queen, which shows that she imagines the female performer, Takamine Taeko, as being a male sovereign prince. While this fan letter may or may not be a sporadic example, it is important to note that some fans had already begun to view some Takarazuka actresses as specifically masculine-gendered actors, which is a gender fiction created not only by the performing female body but also endorsed by her fans.

The number of male fans of the Takarazuka Revue, especially young male fans, was by far larger than the number of female fans before the 1937 Sino-Japanese War (Kawasaki, 2005, p.119). When read within this context, the fan letters from women in the 1920s—especially the one quoted above—may be unique during that time. These female fan letters give us an insight into the personal gaze of female fans who did not passively consume the play but actively inscribed the fiction of masculine gender onto their favorite female performers. I suggest that this perception contributed to paving the way for the emergence of collective gender fictions in which *otokoyaku* are no longer male stage roles that Takarazuka actresses adopt solely during the stage performance. Instead, the collective gender fictions are produced, sustained, and reproduced through the agency of female fans.

## Off-stage *Otokoyaku* Performances in the 1930s

According to Sonoko Azuma (2006), a distinct demarcation between *otokoyaku* (i.e., male roles) and *musumeyaku* (i.e., female roles) emerged in the Takarazuka Revue during the 1930s. Like men, *otokoyaku* cut their hair short. Until the 1920s, *otokoyaku* played male roles with hats to hide their long feminine hair (p.75). In the 1930s, however, the *otokoyaku* attempted to appear more masculine by approximating the physical appearance of men, that is, by cutting their hair short, which until the 1920s was taboo for Japanese women. This means that the 1930s was not only a time of on-stage gender-role differentiation but heralded the emergence

of a continuum between on- and off-stage lives, as the female performers of male roles chose to assume a masculine gender identity in their daily life—if only in appearance—as expressed by their short hair.

The legendary *otokoyaku*, Kasugano Yachiyo, is a good example. My grandmother Mineko Miyamoto was a fan of the Takarazuka Revue. As a little 6-year-old girl, she had the rare opportunity to meet Kasugano Yachiyo in person, when she visited my great-grandfather's atelier in Tokyo. My grandmother remembered that Kasugano Yachiyo wore a tailored man's suit with tie, jacket, and trousers when she was being photographed.

My grandmother reminisced that, in the 1930s, *otokoyaku* wore men's suits exclusively and had their hair cut short. This suggests that *otokoyaku* and *musumeyaku* were no longer roles that Takarazuka actresses could take on and off to perform at will. My grandmother's photograph of Kasugano Yachiyo tells a similar story (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** A 1936 photograph from Kasugano Yachiyo's visit to my great-grandfather's atelier in Okusawa, Tokyo. Left to right: Kasugano Yachiyo (*otokoyaku*), Nijo Miyako (*musumeyaku*), a playwright, my grandmother (Mineko Miyamoto), and my great-grandfather (Saburo Miyamoto).

In Figure 2, Kasugano Yachiyo is shown wearing a tailored jacket and a tie, and her hair is cut short like a man, just like my great-grandfather and the playwright. In contrast, Nijo Miyako wears a kimono and has a traditional Japanese female hairstyle, while the little girl, my grandmother, wears a dress and has an *okappa* (bob) hairstyle and both women are seated. By contrast, Kasugano Yachiyo stands with the other men in the photograph. In the 1930s, *otokoyaku* no longer literally meant male roles that could be taken on and off but became an intricate aspect of the performative self.

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of archival materials regarding the Takarazuka Revue and an interview with my maternal grandmother, this paper has illustrated Takarazuka actresses' gender fictions, particularly *otokoyaku*, as a collective and historical construct. These collective gender fictions have evolved over the 110 years of the history of the Takarazuka Revue between the actresses'

on- and off-stage lives, between the actresses and their fans, and between the theater and print media.

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