



A beautiful adolescent boy is being raped by a decadent old man. A schoolgirl is having a special kind of problem: her body constantly changes gender and she cannot control it.

These are just two examples of story plots in *shoujo manga* or comics for adolescent girls in Japan. The way homosexuality, transgenderism and cross-dressing is treated in comics for adolescent girls poses an interesting contrast to the rather rigid Japanese gender politics. Yet, why is it so popular to read stories of gay love, when one hasn't even fully discovered sexuality? And why is it so exciting to fantasize about a boy who is dressed up as a girl?

Playing with the notion of gender has a long tradition in Japan. The best known example is probably the *onnagata*, the male actor who specializes in performing femininity on the Kabuki stage. Cross-dressed performances are also a characteristic of ritual practices, the Noh theatre and the Takarazuka all-girl theatrical revue where young girls from rich families are being trained to perform male roles on stage - the most convincing and beautiful ones are celebrated as national superstars among a female audience.

No boy can ever be as beautiful as a girl performing a boy and vice-versa. This exactly hits the nerve of the Japanese sense of beauty. Longing. Nostalgia. The beauty of the unattainable. This is also the prevalent atmosphere in *shoujo manga*.

It was in 1972 that a group of young and talented women began their radical experiment of introducing the worlds of cross-dressing, transgenderism and homosexuality to the girls' comic genre. Even if very marginal to the main story plot, a pinch of sexual ambivalence made the stories enormously successful. Ikeda Ryoko's "The Rose of Versailles" (1972), Hagio Moto's "The Heart of Thomas" (1974) and Takemya Keiko's "The Song of Wind and Trees" (1976) have become classics and their authors are now giants in the manga industry.

Fujimoto Yukari says, that since the introduction of these subjects to the girls genre, the comics can now be divided into five categories:

- 1 Girls who dress as boys
- 2 Boys who dress as girls
- 3 Boy-boy love
- 4 Sexual science-fiction (stories in which the social and biological systems governing sexual difference are completely reconstructed)
- 5 Polymorphous perverse (everything not covered by the other four categories)

(Fujimoto 91;55)

Ikeda Ryoko's famous "The Rose of Versailles" falls into the first category: the story plays at the French court during the Revolution. The heroine of the story is Oscar, Marie Antoinette's body-guard, who was raised as a boy and consequently has adopted the identity of a male. She is an androgynous beauty with her long fair hair, her blue eyes, in her uniform. Very rarely though, Oscar lets her femininity shine through, and when she does so, the story becomes most exciting. She violently falls in love with a Swedish nobleman and spends one night in his arms dancing with him dressed as a woman. But the facts that Oscar's flame loves Marie Antoinette and that, at the end, Oscar dies while storming the Bastille are another example of the bittersweet nostalgia the *shoujo* genre is made of.

The *bishounen*, the beautiful boy, is the one that likes to dress as a girl. He is young, feminine,