



Boram Choi*

The Cultural Paradox of All-Male Performance: (Dis)Figuring the Third Beauty in the Studio Life's *Twelfth Night*

Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the ambiguous and unstable boundaries of gender images depicted in Studio Life's *Twelfth Night* (2011) where male actors perform female characters similar to the practice on the Shakespearean stage. As Akira Uno, one of the influential illustrators of Japanese *shōjo* manga, participated in designing the stage set, costumes, and make-up of the characters, the production presents the effect of "the third beauty." This is characterised by both masculine and feminine attributes while simultaneously being neither masculine nor feminine. This unique feature reflects the position of women in modern Japanese society, where representations of female gender and sexuality are often marginalised and oppressed under the male-dominated social atmosphere. Consequently, the image of female gender has been rigidly fixed and stereotyped according to traditional norms. In this setting, the effeminate and beautiful boys in an exotic place become surrogates for females, who can freely explore their gender and sexual identity within the illusory world, where both homoerotic and heterosexual relationships are explored. Studio Life's *Twelfth Night* reflects this illusion by adapting the styles of *shōjo* manga, but the production seldom offers critical insights or questions on gender issues, especially in the context of the realities faced by Japanese women in daily life. This article examines descriptions of female characters performed by male actors and interviews with the director, Kurata Jun. The main focus is on how the artists perceive and express the concept of gender in relation to Japanese social conditions, demonstrated through their physical portrayals and gestures in all-male casting.

Keywords: all-male casting, *shōjo* manga, Studio Life, *Twelfth Night*, Japanese Shakespeare.

* Korea National University of Arts. brchoi80@gmail.com



Introduction

The exploration of gender ambiguity through exclusively male casting illuminates the multifaceted interpretations of the actors' presence within the Japanese cultural ethos and the historical continuum of gender enactment. The practice of casting male actors as female personas in traditional Japanese theatres, such as *kabuki* and *noh*, reveals an intricate method where actors embody and project an idealised femininity, rooted in a specific set of bodily semiotics. The theatrical tradition views the gender of female characters as a construct, created from precise performance codes and aesthetic styles, effectively infusing traits of femininity into the male physique (Mezur 137). Such fluidity of gender portrayal is further enhanced as actors take on various roles across gender boundaries, thus enriching the nuanced gender dynamics inherent in Japanese theatrical tradition. Carol Sorgenfrei observes that "transformation is a crucial aspect of Japanese performance" evident in both acting and staging, and she highlights that "an alluring ambiguity appears to be the key to understanding what it means to be Japanese" (351). This tradition of cross-dressing legacy continues to influence the gender expression and gestural vocabulary of characters and actors in contemporary Japanese theatre. By casting male actors for female parts, thus spotlighting the 'third gender'—a state transcending traditional male and female classifications—modern Japanese directors challenge the rigid gender dichotomies prevalent in their cultural and societal structures.

However, the introduction of Western realism into Japanese theatrical arts, marked by the emergence of the *shingeki* movement in the early twentieth century, led to a decrease in the prominence of gender fluidity in traditional Japanese theatrical styles. Suzuki Tadashi¹ notes that *shingeki*'s commitment to a binary gender structure limited actors to portrayals that mirrored societal norms in Japan (11). Takakuwa Yoko critiques this binary gender fixation, calling it a potential "spiritual illness or another form of madness" where society becomes "obsessed by the (internalised) 'truth' of what it means to be a man or a woman" (37). She argues that adhering to culturally prescribed gender roles onstage may alienate audiences from exploring alternate gender identities. The impact of this shift was two-pronged: it favoured Western aesthetics over Japanese sensitivities and created a paradox in which the Japanese, skilled in adopting Western theatrical styles, found it challenging to integrate these with native elements (Nouryeh 267). The rise of *shingeki*, led many artists to abandon traditional theatre aesthetics in favour of more realistic forms of expression.

¹ In writing Japanese names, I adhere to the Japanese convention where the family name is written first, followed by the given name.

Contemporary Japanese theatrical works often embody this dichotomous stance, wrestling with gender ambiguity while being ensnared in the *shingeki* tradition of reinforcing gender binaries. Studio Life's adaptation of *Twelfth Night* in Tokyo in 2009 and 2011 serves as a prime example of this intricate balancing act between traditional norms and contemporary gender discourse.² Directed by Kurata Jun, the production employs an all-male cast, rooted in Elizabethan theatre traditions where male actors historically assumed all characters. Kurata's innovative direction is further enhanced by her collaboration with Uno Akira (Uno Aquirax), a renowned manga illustrator. This partnership brought a *shōjo* manga aesthetic to the production, celebrated for its ethereal and transformative depiction of gender, thereby blurring the lines of traditional gender representation. This artistic choice not only modernises Shakespeare's narrative but also introduces a complex layer of interpretation, leading the audience to rethink and broaden their perceptions of gender norms.

Kurata's directorial approach melds the deep psychological exploration typical of *shingeki* with the imaginative storytelling found in modern media like manga. While her adaptation of *Twelfth Night* remains faithful to the *shingeki* tradition of psychological depth and a focus on the actor's narrative, it also explores gender fluidity through its casting choices. Yet, this combination of styles, albeit innovative, paradoxically upholds entrenched gender norms, despite the inherent challenges to traditional roles presented in the play. In this regard, Studio Life represents a significant moment in the evolution of Japanese theatre, where the amalgamation of classical and modern forms forges a distinctive conversation about gender. This article examines Studio Life's *Twelfth Night*, analysing how the production explores gender ambiguity with an all-male cast while concurrently capitulating to entrenched notions of gender binarism as propagated by *shingeki* performance techniques. The performance deals with gender and gender representations as cultural constructs in contemporary Japanese theatre. Moreover, the article scrutinises the directorial merging of diverse acting styles as representative of the tensions within Japanese culture, oscillating between conservative and progressive attitudes on gender and sexuality. Ultimately, this analysis explores how audiences perceive gender ambiguity in the context of prevailing societal ideologies in Japan, indicating a tendency towards a binary interpretation of gender roles.

² The Studio Life, founded by Kawauchi Kiichiro and Kurata Jun in 1985, has developed its artistic identity on three foundational pillars: original works by Kurata, dramatisation of foreign literature, and adaptations of manga into theatrical performances (2014). While Kurata's creations are often reserved for smaller-scale productions featuring the company's burgeoning talents, the dramatisations of novels and manga are staged as their principal productions.

The Beautiful Boys: Exploring the Art of Gender Ambiguity

The adaptation of Shakespearean works in Japan over the past century and a half has not only transcended the boundaries of performance art but also permeated diverse genres such as comics, manga, and animation. Manga, in particular, has established itself as a cross-generational cultural phenomenon, persisting for several decades. *Shōjo* manga, which primarily focuses on narratives of romantic complexities and the depiction of gender identities within the fantastical realms of non-specific ‘other’ places—often stylised versions of Western locales in different historical epochs—exemplifies this trend. A distinctive characteristic of *shōjo* manga is its protagonists, who are typically depicted as youthful figures with a pronounced androgyny; even the boys possess an ethereal femininity, effectively blurring gender lines. Regardless of the characters’ gender, they are consistently illustrated with slender physiques with vibrant and expansive eyes, and their “hair is long and flowing, their waist narrow, their legs long and their eyes big” (Prough 95). These stylistic depictions emphasise gender ambiguity and fluidity which become important features in *shōjo* manga. According to Tomoko Aoyama, “none of the residents of the idealized world feels guilty about his being a homosexual, or has to seek his identity” (196). The portrayals of both female and male characters in *shōjo* manga are remarkably exotic and extend beyond realistic embodiment, casting their gender identities as indeterminate and unstable.

The portrayal of gender ambiguity is crucial for understanding how this genre translates gender representation in Shakespeare’s plays. The narrative of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* begins in the unknown place called Illyria, with Viola’s disoriented inquiry, “What country, friends, is this?” (1.2.1), setting the stage for a world where gender is both performed and subverted. In this new world, Viola’s adoption of a male disguise serves not only as a survival tactic but also as a means to explore the fluidity of her youthful gender identity, affording her with the opportunity to challenge traditionally held distinctions between male and female identities. This liminal space in Illyria represents her passage from youth into adulthood, as reflected in Malvolio’s description of Viola/Cesario as a “young fellow” (1.5.135) who is “not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy” (1.5.152-153). Moreover, Orsino’s remarks on Cesario’s appearance highlight the qualities of a maiden, “Diana’s lip / Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe / Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman’s part” (1.4.30-34). These lines underscore the duality of Cesario’s gender presentation, capturing the essence of a page boy who can both allure and be allured by different sexes. There appear to be shared characteristics between the Elizabethan practice of boys portraying female roles on stage and the nuanced and indistinct gender portrayal of male characters in Japanese *shōjo* manga, both of which embrace a subtle and

ambiguous depiction of gender. Particularly, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* aligns seamlessly with the narrative conventions of *shōjo* manga, where young girls who cross-dress for various reasons mirror Viola's own journey, while other male characters are rendered as androgynous beauties, eluding strict categorisation as either female or male.

Studio Life's *Twelfth Night* invites audiences to explore the complexities of gender and sexuality through the practice of all-male casting. Abe Nozomi, an assistant director in the theatre company, reveals that "manga dramatisation is one of the styles that Studio Life has pursued." This approach is demonstrated in their adaptations of manga, like Hagio Moto's *The Heart of Thomas*, in the 1990s and is further evident in their more recent Shakespearean endeavors—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2006), *Romeo and Juliet* (2007), and *The Taming of the Shrew* (2008)—which have demonstrated notable parallels to manga in both visual and narrative styles, as well as in the portrayal and theatrical techniques of the male actors.³ The production design of their *Twelfth Night*, from costuming to makeup and set design, is imbued with the quintessential elements of *shōjo* manga, a creative synergy achieved through their collaboration with Uno Akira. Uno, who was significantly involved in the Japanese underground art of the 1960s and 70s, is recognised for his influence on many Japanese manga artists (Kurata "The Studio Life"). As an artist proficient in graphic design, illustration, and painting, Uno is renowned for his distinctive style of drawing illustrations, characterised by "fantastic visuals, capricious and sensuous line flow, flamboyant eroticism" ("Aquirax Uno"). His artistic signatures—notably the large eyes, slender necks, and refined body lines—prioritise the emotive over the representational in girls' comics. Uno himself has expounded on the symbolism and significance of such imagery: "the big eyes become a mirror of their desires to become beautiful heroines. For the acceptance of the girl's image, it is important for readers to self-identify and see themselves in the two-dimensional image" (Uno 122). This depiction of female characters with large eyes has established a new aesthetic ideal among Japanese girls, signifying a cultural preference profoundly influenced by Western beauty standards.

Studio Life's *Twelfth Night* showcases male actors whose portrayals vividly recall the aesthetics of manga characters, distinguished by their androgynous beauty. Each character's fantastical representation, complete with colourful wigs

³ Koji Ishitobi, who performed Feste in Studio Life's *Twelfth Night*, notes a congruence between the structural elements of Shakespeare's text and the conventional narrative techniques used in manga. He states: "The monologue of Shakespeare might be comparable to the text found outside of manga speech balloons, serving to deliver a variety of messages including monologues, asides, and dialogue. This comparison suggests a similarity between the range of expression in Shakespearean drama and the visual storytelling in manga" (Kurata "The Studio Life").

and ornate costumes, signals their existence in a fantastical, exotic locale. The stage design of Illyria mirrors a utopian vision, reminiscent of the dreamscapes sought after by the female audience, a sentiment echoed in the settings of many *shōjo* manga, showcasing the younger generation's intrigue and aspirations toward Western culture.⁴ Within this undefined, imaginative space, none of the female characters (or female audiences) feels guilty about being homosexual or having to seek their identity. According to Kurata, Uno's scenic designs imbue the production with a sense of realism so profound that "it may lead the audience to think that such a fabricated world exists in reality" (Kurata "Akira Uno"). The theatrical interplay between the crafted beauty of the play and the male performers' physical masculinity enables the audience to perceive a spectrum of gender representations: "the performer (Matsumoto), in the role of Viola/Cesario, possessed a beauty surpassing that typically attributed to women; his countenance was so delicately featured it could stir romantic admiration, yet his robust, muscular arms served as a distinct reminder of his masculinity" (Hara). The intergration of two different gender roles in a single actor suggests the fluidity of gender, inviting the audience to recognise a "third beauty." This theatrical exploration of cross-dressing manifests a "third beauty," intertwining feminine and masculine traits, thus defying conventional gender classifications predicted upon biological or societal norms.

In her interview, Kurata revealed that the production's design phase entailed a creative process akin to manga storyboarding, where she mentally sketched the characters' movements, such as "their postures and walking directions, aiming to translate these conceptual images into tangible stage representations" (Kurata "The Studio Life"). This approach is similar to the methods of devising the structure of manga, where characters' psychological and emotional states are portrayed through varied panel shapes and speech balloons, and each panel conveys distinct scene-specific information. Furthermore, Kurata suggested that "if the audience captures any images from the performers' actions or stage ensembles, the images might align with the scenes she had initially conceptualised" (Kurata "The Studio Life"). Kurata's admission of being "influenced by manga culture since the 1960s" ("The Studio Life") suggests the possibility that the audience might recognise familiar images within this production. These images, potentially embedded in their long-term collective memory, may resonate unconsciously with viewers, reflecting the deep-seated

⁴ Uno's scenic construction of Illyria in Studio Life's *Twelfth Night* employs numerous cubic blocks strategically placed at the stage's periphery, while the central area is reserved for actors' entrances and exits. The primary benefit of this design lies in its boundless potential for transformation and movement, serving as dynamic visual signifiers. The temporal and spatial setting of the production is deliberately ambiguous, described as "someday, but not on a specific date" and "somewhere, but at no specific location" (Sohn 259).

impact of manga culture. This shared historical context of Japanese manga spanning the last five decades potentially establishes manga as a pivotal medium, fostering a communicative bridge between the production and its audience.

For the adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, the initial step involved translating Shakespeare's text into Japanese. This significant undertaking was accomplished by Matsuoka Kazuko, a renowned theatre scholar and translator. Kurata made minor modifications to Matsuoka's translation to better suit theatrical dynamics (Kurata "The Studio Life"). Kurata chose Matsuoka's translation specifically for its distinct sensitivity towards female characters. This choice was made with the intention of providing audiences "a deeper connection with the nuanced emotional states of these characters," in contrast to the portrayal of male characters' inner worlds (Kurata "The Studio Life").⁵ Kurata's emphasis on the emotional aspects of the characters could be correlated with the appeal of gender portrayals in *shōjo* manga to a predominantly female audience. This trend may reflect significant elements of Japanese culture concerning gender roles and perceptions. According to Kurata, Studio Life's productions have been "very popular particularly among female audiences aged 20 to 40" ("Akira Uno"). Given that *shōjo* manga often portrays gender ambiguously and primarily targets female readers, it frequently features romantic narratives between men and women as a central theme. Kurata notes that "female audiences, often experiencing solitude and isolation, seek liberation from these realities through empathizing with heroines who navigate life unconstrained by societal restrictions" ("The Studio Life"). This is one of the reasons that Kurata, as a female director, strives to describe the inner world of the female characters in a delicate and complex manner.

In particular, the exclusive use of male actors facilitates the exploration of diverse gender identities for the audience as they identify with various characters. Viola's disguise as a boy introduces a layer of homosexual undertones in her interactions with Orsino, suggesting a relationship between two men. At the same time, the visual portrayal with long hair and feminine costumes evokes the image of a romantic bond between two women. Additionally, Olivia's fervent pursuit of Viola/Cesario can be seen as lesbianism, and it also represents a romantic connection between two male actors in female attire. The male actors in female roles, by eliciting homoerotic responses from the audience,

⁵ Matsuoka is distinguished as potentially the third Japanese person, and notably the first woman, to translate the entirety of Shakespeare's works. Her translations are renowned for their alignment with colloquial Japanese, exhibiting less pronounced differentiation based on gender, age, or social class compared to other translations. In her production, Kurata specifically selected Matsuoka's translation due to its acclaim for rendering the speech of female characters "more natural to the ears of the audiences and to the actors and actresses" (Harris).

serve as agents of resistance against the rigid biological and social constructs of gender roles in contemporary Japanese society.

The gender ambiguity of the characters enhances the ability of female spectators to identify themselves with both male and female roles within the theatrical illusion. Engaged in a theatre production that dramatises *shōjo* manga, female spectators can envision themselves as the aesthetically portrayed girls and boys within this fantastical realm. Specifically, “beautiful boys’ love (*bishōnen ai*) is often described and this has been considered a subgenre that certainly offers an imaginary playground for the Japanese girls who wish to escape from reality” (Shamoon 111). The concept of the beautiful boy has roots in historical Japanese culture, appreciating young men with androgynous beauty. In modern media, it features prominently in manga and anime, evolving to include explicit depictions of romantic and sometimes sexual relationships between male characters. Hence, the production may allow the female audience to feel a kind of homoerotic *frisson* through the depiction of relationships between attractive male characters, concurrently reinforcing heterosexual dynamics between male and female roles in alignment with the gender ideologies prevalent in contemporary patriarchal society.

In Studio Life’s production, Malvolio’s attire, notably his yellow stockings, is designed to resonate with a female audience. Retaining his black and grey suit jacket, Malvolio transitions from formal trousers to short pants with yellow stockings, a sartorial choice manifesting his affection for Olivia. The juxtaposition of his austere suit with the incongruously juvenile short pants carries a nuanced connotation of sexuality. In Japanese culture, this evokes the concept of *shōtacon*, a contraction of “*shōtarō* complex,” which alludes to an aesthetic and thematic motif in manga and anime genres, where young boys are presented in a romantic or erotic light.⁶ *Shōtacon* is related to “the concepts of *kawaii* (cuteness) and *moe* (in which characters are presented as young, cute or helpless in order to increase reader identification and inspire protective feelings)” (“Shotacon”). Malvolio’s sartorial transformation seeks to embody dual appeal, blending masculinity with an effeminacy that historically echoes the Elizabethan practice of boy actors donning female attire to elicit a protective sentiment from the audience.

The exploration of gender ambiguity in Shakespearean theatre, especially through ‘third beauty,’ was notably exemplified in the all-male performance tradition. This practice saw boy actors assume female roles, creating an idealised, hybrid form that sparked sexual intrigue among both male and female audience members. Jean Howard notes that in such a context, women emerged as “desiring subjects” (79), and Phyllis Rackin highlights how Shakespeare’s

⁶ The term’s origin lies with the character *Shōtarō* from the series *Tetsujin 28-go*, known in English as *Gigantor*.

works “explicitly mark the players’ awareness that they needed to please female playgoers” (76).⁷ From this perspective, it is conceivable that female spectators might fantasise about romantic interactions with male actors on stage, or envision themselves as characters whose gender is ambiguously portrayed due to their aesthetically pleasing appearance. Randolph Trumbach also comments that the boy actors enhanced their feminine appearance with wigs and makeup, arousing desires of both male and female spectators (128). The *shōtacon* style in Japanese theatre mirrors the thematic element of immaturity prevalent in Elizabethan all-male casts, resonating with both homosexual and heterosexual responses, especially among female audience members in Japan. Contemporary theatre companies interpret and adapt these themes within their cultural contexts, with adaptations like the yellow stockings scene in a *shōtacon* style reflecting key cultural nuances related to gender and sexuality in Japanese society.

The development of the ‘third beauty’ in *shōjo* manga and Japanese theatrical culture is intricately linked to Japan’s evolving social landscape. Historically, gender roles in Japan have been rigidly defined, with stringent expectations on sexual expressions. Since the 1970s, Japanese women have gained increased economic and social autonomy, leading to more public expressions of their sexuality. This shift has provoked unease among men, often leading to negative connotations associated with female sexuality. Mark McLelland critically examines this dynamic, noting that Japanese media often marginalises female sexuality, dismissing “female activists as overly emotional and hysterical, referring to their arguments as ‘red ranting’ (red being associated with Communism but also being the colour associated with feminism in Japan)” (“Male Homosexuality” 63). Sandra Buckley also highlights the limited freedom of expression afforded to Japanese women, pointing out their struggle to articulate their experiences and desires in various aspects of life (178). John Treat argues that embracing a sexless state allows Japanese girls to “constitute their own gender, neither male nor female but something importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual production” (281). Consequently, *shōjo* manga emerges as a crucial cultural form, offering a sanctuary for female readers. These manga provide a space where readers can identify with protagonists who embody ideals of freedom and resistance against the sexist roles imposed by societal systems. Thus, this genre thus serves as a critical medium for exploring and affirming female agency and identity in a society still grappling with rigid gender norms.

⁷ Rackin states: “The Epilogue to *As You Like It* is a good case in point. Spoken by the actor who played Rosalind, it addresses female and male playgoers separately, beginning with the women, whom it charges ‘to like as much of this play as please you,’ thus suggesting that the ‘you’ in the play’s title refers primarily to them” (46-47).

Marginalised Women: Reproducing the Masculinist Fantasy

In Studio Life's adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, the portrayal of gender ambiguity through male actors becomes an allegorical commentary on the prescribed gender roles within Japanese patriarchal society. Contemporary Japan is characterised by rigid gender roles and suppression of women's sexuality, often casting women typically in passive roles. Interestingly, there is a concurrent yearning among women to escape these confines, mirrored in Viola's male disguise in *Twelfth Night* as a subversive act against patriarchal constraints, enabling her to navigate society as an autonomous entity. Unlike other Shakespearean comedies, such as *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* concludes without reaffirming standard erotic couplings or gender stratifications. This open-endedness underscores the play's investment in the complexities of gender, leaving behind a "large residue of bi-gendered and bisexual subjectivity" (Neely 120). Viola's cross-dressing introduces a 'beautiful boy' to the audience, complicating the nature of attraction in her interactions with Orsino and Olivia. Her male attire veils her female identity, allowing exploration of both heteroerotic and homoerotic dynamics. Thus, Viola's affections for Orsino and Olivia's affections for her can safely transpire, unencumbered by the revelation of her true gender. This portrayal resonates with female spectators, who may find Viola's fluid gender identity—simultaneously embodying and transcending both male and female—as a liberating reflection of their own experiences with the fluidity of gender roles.

Yet, far from the production's exploration of gender ambiguity, as manifested through Uno's visual aesthetic in the performers' appearance and stage design, the performers' acting style is predominantly bound to the delineation of gender. This is achieved by accentuating traditional notions of femininity and masculinity through a series of actions deeply entrenched in gender stereotypes. The influence of contemporary Japanese theatrical forms, such as *shingeki*, is evident in this approach, given its propensity to reinforce conventional gender images. The male performers, in particular, are tasked with portraying characters in a manner that reflects their own interpretations of both female and male genders. Their actions and gestures are strategically chosen to assert gender identities, aiming to cultivate a sense of authenticity in their character portrayal for the audience. As Kurata admits in an interview, "there is an apparent preconceived notion among the performers regarding the expected behaviours of females and males, based on their individual understandings of femininity and masculinity" ("The Studio Life"). This approach leads to a simplistic representation, especially of female characters, through gestures symbolising femininity. These binary gender portrayals resonate with the general societal attitudes towards gender in modern Japanese culture. As a result,

the performance adheres closely to the play's narrative without offering a critical or expansive examination of gender and sexuality.

For instance, Matsumoto Shinya's portrayal of Viola/Cesario is a compelling study of gender performativity. He meticulously delineates the feminine and masculine aspects of his dual role, particularly accentuating the transformation from Viola to Cesario. His portrayal of Viola is infused with distinctly feminine characteristics. This is evident in his nuanced manipulation of voice tone, which he renders softer, and in the delicate execution of gestures involving his hands and legs. A recurring motif in his portrayal of Viola is the gentle lifting of hands to touch his lips and chest, a symbolic amplification of the character's feminine allure. Conversely, Matsumoto's portrayal of Cesario is marked by overtly masculine behaviours, eschewing the feminine gestures previously employed. This transition is underscored in scenes where Viola, disguised as Cesario, conspicuously adjusts her clothes, touching her breast area to signify her underlying female identity while outwardly assuming a male persona. Matsumoto augments this transformation with a deeper voice, an expanded chest, and clenched fists, embodying traditional symbols of masculinity. Importantly, these gestures are deliberately employed to reinforce to the audience his portrayal of a male character. However, it is critical to note that these gendered gestures and behaviours do not mirror the broader contemporary Japanese perceptions of gender. Instead, they align with and perhaps critique the societal attitudes and mentalities towards gender and sexuality. In this respect, Matsumoto's performance can be seen as both a reflection and a commentary on the gender norms prevailing in modern Japanese culture, encapsulated in a form that is both evocative and reductive.

Despite characters embodying a 'third beauty' that transcends traditional gender binaries in appearance, their behaviours remain deeply entrenched in gender ideologies. Notably, this is exemplified in the interactions between Cesario and Orsino, particularly in Act 1, Scene 4, where Orsino's physical engagement with Viola/Cesario—including arm-wrapping, facial touching, and a tight embrace—reinforces conventional gender roles. Orsino's remark on Cesario's glossy and ruby-like lips and the ensuing posture reminiscent of a prelude to a kiss underscore the stereotypical gender roles in their interaction. Although the fluidity in gender portrayal, the dynamics remain conventionally heterosexual, with Orsino predominantly initiating interactions and asserting dominance. Conversely, Viola/Cesario's character adheres to passive, traditional femininity, predominantly reactive rather than proactive or assertive in their romantic development. This depiction subtly mirrors typical heterosexual relationships, even within the homosexual love plot framework. Additionally, the production's approach may echo stereotypes prevalent in BL (Boys' Love) manga, particularly the "*seme*" (aggressive) and "*uke*" (passive) archetypes, reflecting gender discrimination in Japanese society. Such representation

suggests that even in the fantasy realm of BL manga, societal biases against women persist. As a result, the audience, especially female viewers, are exposed to traditional gender role portrayals, where female characters are more passive and delicate in romantic settings compared to male counterparts. Therefore, while the production's visual presentation allows a fluid interpretation of gender through the characters' "third beauty," it ultimately reaffirms conventional heterosexual norms within an androcentric societal context.

Moreover, the physical interactions between two male characters in Studio Life's production amplify the narrative tension, resonating not only within the character dynamics but also among audiences familiar with *shōjo* manga tropes. McLelland's analysis of homoeroticism in *shōjo* manga highlights the unconventional nature of romantic relationship between two girls (*shōjo ai*) in Japan's male-dominant society. He argues that in such relationships, it becomes ambiguous "who should 'take the lead' (*riido wo shite*) in initiating a sexual encounter" ("The Beautiful Boy" 84). This perspective mirrors the dynamics in Studio Life's production, where Olivia's passionate love for Viola/Cesario remains devoid of physical contact, contrasting sharply with the frequent physical touches between Orsino and Viola/Cesario. This differential treatment reflects broader societal attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Japan. Buckley notes a greater societal tolerance for male homosexuality compared to lesbianism (174). This phenomenon is partly due to the avoidance by manga artists, such as Hagio Moto, of depicting female same-sex relationships. Hagio revealed in an interview that "I found the plan about the girls' school to be gloomy and disgusting ... Take a kissing scene, for instance ... as sticky as fermented soybeans" (Qtd. in McLelland "The Beautiful Boy" 83). She may have wanted to "avoid homophobic reactions from her female readers who might have found the idea of girls kissing disgusting" (McLelland "The Beautiful Boy" 83) and consider boys' kissing is somehow safer in Japanese society. Indeed, the representation of female sexuality in Japanese manga and media is often marginalised, with lesbianism being no exception. Consequently, Japanese comic books have historically gravitated towards exploring male homosexuality. In these narratives, the femininely depicted bodies of male characters often serve as a surrogate for female self-identification. This trend underscores not only the complexities of gender and sexual representation in Japanese culture but also the prevailing societal norms that influence these artistic expressions.

Furthermore, the portrayal of intimate moments between Orsino and Cesario evokes a unique response among audiences familiar with *shōjo* manga. Michael Shapiro insists that "spectators respond to theatrical representations of intimacy as primal fantasies" (144), indicating that this kind of scene provides the audience with a strong feeling of anxiety. He asserts that theatrical representations of intimacy, such as kissing and embracing, whether between

male or female characters, can arouse a spectrum of emotional responses in spectators, ranging from sexual desire to jealousy, embarrassment, and even fear. In this production, the female audience is likely to project themselves into the relationships portrayed between the beautiful male characters. This projection aligns with the male-dominated ideology prevalent in society, leading them to perceive such relationships as natural or acceptable. Here, the depiction of male love serves as a vicarious outlet for the expression of female sexual desire within the confines of Japan's repressed social conditions. However, this phenomenon appears to contradict the initial expectation that androgynous figures in the production would empower female audiences to identify with idealised versions of themselves, thereby enabling them to transcend the restrictive gender roles imposed by a patriarchal system. Instead of facilitating an escape from sexist stereotypes, the portrayal of these relationships may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender dynamics. This paradox highlights the complex interplay between gender representation, audience perception, and societal norms in the context of theatrical productions.

In the production, the director's approach predominantly aligns with a conventional portrayal of the play's narrative, eschewing in-depth examination or expansion of gender and sexuality within the context of contemporary Japanese society. The performance notably refrains from challenging prevailing Japanese perceptions of gender roles. As articulated by Kurata in an interview, her interest did not lie in exploring gender ambiguity, particularly through the all-male casting. She asserts, "the main purpose of this production is not to explore the theme of gender" ("The Studio Life"). Additionally, Kurata clarifies that any homoerotic interpretations between the characters or male actors are unintended and solely reside in the realm of audience perception ("The Studio Life"). In her performance, female characters are portrayed as conforming to the traditional expectations of heteronormative marriage, as originally depicted by Shakespeare, thereby reinforcing their roles within a patriarchal societal structure. The narrative trajectory follows Viola's aspirations for a conventional heterosexual marriage with Orsino, positioning this as a preferable, socially accepted norm. Simultaneously, Olivia, initially enamoured with a woman disguised as a man, eventually consents to a matrimonial union with a male character, signifying a retreat to conventional gender roles. This narrative choice, rather than exploring the fluidity and spectrum of gender identity, reinforces a conservative stance on gender politics. The production implicitly endorses the notion that females should adhere to their traditional social roles, thus negating the potential of theatrical expression to challenge or reinterpret the dynamics of homosexual love. While the play presents opportunities to explore the complexities of gender beyond binary constraints, the production ultimately opts for a conservative resolution. It suggests that females, both within the theatrical illusion and actual societal context, should revert to their pre-established positions, thereby maintaining the status quo.

In this production, one of the intricate challenges faced by actors is the portrayal of the female characters' emotional states through both physical and linguistic expression. It demands a understanding of characters' psychology and emotional depth, as highlighted by the directorial approach of Kurata. She revolutionises previous acting techniques by instructing her actors not to rely on physical gestures to convey the meanings of their lines. Instead, she encourages a deeper, more introspective form of acting where the performers are tasked with immersing themselves in the characters' emotional experiences. This process involves envisioning and internalising how the characters would feel in specific situations and then translating these emotions authentically as if the actors embody the characters themselves. Kurata's approach is grounded in her desire to enable actors to share a more profound and genuine emotional connection with the audience. Her technique aligns with Studio Life's artistic mission to explore the theme of "*raison d'être*" in their theatrical works (Kurata "The Studio Life"). This concept posits that every character possesses a unique existential purpose and resilience, persevering through life's challenges. In particular, Kurata attempts to focus on "the process of how the female characters carve out their own fortunes by reading Shakespeare's play from a female perspective" (Kurata "Akira Uno"). She seeks to explore how female characters navigate and shape their destinies within the narrative framework, thereby offering an insightful perspective on these roles. Through this approach, Kurata aims to capture the multifaceted nature of human life, shedding light on both the luminous and shadowed aspects of existence.

This production raises a critical question: In what ways does it assist female audiences in discovering their own *raison d'être*, particularly when it does not overtly address issues of gender and sexuality within the context of contemporary Japanese society? The concept of *raison d'être* embodies the complex ambiguities that arise from unique gender portrayals, and its theme can be particularly developed in this theatrical space where the illusions of representation are critically examined and demystified, especially through Viola's disguise. The audience is thus encouraged to engage deeply with the significance of Viola's disguise, not merely as a narrative device but as a reflection of her contextual experiences. Viola understands the danger of disguise as "a wicked" art (2.2.27) that leads Olivia to construct a fantasy based on Viola's appearance rather than the truth underneath it. This narrative device prompts female audience members to re-evaluate and expand their understanding of gender performance, particularly in light of the complexities of gender ambiguity in relation to contemporary Japanese social and cultural circumstances. Despite Kurata's seemingly peripheral focus on gender issues, the production inherently addresses these themes. This is evident in the meticulous replication of specific gestures and imagery, enhancing the production's illusion and inviting the audience to consider the female characters

as more than mere narrative entities. They become symbolic figures, enabling viewers to question and understand the instability and fluidity associated with visual indicators of gender identity. Moreover, the casting of male actors in female roles further enriches this thematic exploration. It introduces an additional layer of complexity, particularly with regard to the homoerotic implications that arise from these gender-crossing performances. The depiction of homoerotic desire among the characters offers profound insights into gender and sexuality, extending beyond the psychological dimensions of the characters.

On the theatre company's official website, there is an expectation set forth that "the audience can concentrate on the story of *Twelfth Night*, which will highlight a sense of theatricality as the result" (Studio Life). The company also asserts that the performance prioritises portraying the "psychological state of the female characters" and their journey "pioneering their own fate in avoidance of exaggerated gestures for emphasizing artificial femininity" (Studio Life). This approach indicates a focus on the inner experiences and emotions of the female characters rather than on the traditional aesthetics of masculine or feminine bodies. However, there appears to be an inherent contradiction in these statements. Theatricality, as defined by Davis and Postlewait, is "a way of describing what performers and what spectators do together in the making of 'the theatrical event'" (23). It encompasses the conventions of theatrical communication, including the audience's conscious recognition and reflection on the stage's happenings. More critically, theatricality is used "to describe the gap between reality and its representation" (Davis and Postlewait 6). William Sauter further elaborates that "theatricality is meant to represent the essential or possible characteristics of theatre as an art form and as a cultural phenomenon" (50). In this context, the claim that focusing solely on the play's narrative and the characters' internal states will engender "a sense of theatricality" seems questionable, particularly without integrating the broader social context of Japan into the production's theme. It appears that the audience is encouraged not only to engage with the characters' psychologies within their fictional realms but also to consider various explicit cultural and aesthetic conventions. This is because concentrating exclusively on the plot and characters' psychological depths might lead the audience towards a mimetic illusion of the fictional world, rather than acknowledging the production as a deliberate artistic expression of social identities intertwined with the play's thematic essence.

Conclusion

The practice in Shakespearean theatre of male actors portraying female roles can be seen as reinforcing the patriarchal ideologies prevalent in early modern English culture. Stephen Greenblatt, in discussing transvestite disguises in Shakespearean

comedies like *Twelfth Night*, suggests that this convention reflects a male-centric worldview, positing that “men love women precisely as *representations*” and that such all-male performances “theorize a masculinist fantasy of a world without women” (emphasis in original, 93). Consequently, it becomes crucial to examine how the representation of femininity within these constructs can contribute to a deeper understanding of the feminine gender in Japanese culture, which has historically been marginalised under patriarchal systems.

However, the use of all-male casting in Studio Life’s adaptation of *Twelfth Night* appears to fall short in challenging the existing gender stratifications or in introducing transformative perspectives on gender, particularly in its relation to societal awareness and the prevailing male hegemony. Although the production employs the convention of cross-dressing to explore gender ambiguity, it ultimately perpetuates stereotypical gender roles through the adoption of the *shingeki* style of acting. This style reinforces gender binarism, relying on conventional actions that emphasise femininity and masculinity. Therefore, the thematic focus of this performance may be perceived as merely reinforcing established gender constructs, lacking a critical examination or revisionist perspective on traditional gender roles. This approach misses the opportunity to question or subvert pre-existing views on gender, thus limiting its potential impact as a social critique within the context of contemporary Japanese society. Kurata’s incorporation of various performance styles in her production intricately portrays the complex nature of gender and sexuality representation in Japanese theatre culture. Simultaneously, it reveals her struggle to reconcile divergent views on female gender within the traditional and contemporary Japanese societal context. In particular, the use of gender ambiguity, exemplified by Uno’s visual effect of the ‘third beauty,’ is employed as a transient form of entertainment. Yet, this approach is ultimately normalised by the audience, owing to the actors’ realistic performances that reinforce traditional gender binaries within a heteronormative societal framework.

In this light, the influence of *shōjo* manga culture, which reflects a yearning to break free from the rigid roles assigned to women in Japanese society and theatricalises this aspiration, remains passive and constrained within the existing social structure. Hence, the production’s role should be more dynamic and forward-thinking, guiding the audience to a deeper understanding of ‘beauty’ and encouraging them to question their traditional passive roles. In this context, exploring gender dynamics—encompassing heterosexual, homosexual, and queer relationships—is crucial. This exploration is not limited to merely understanding the play’s characters or the act of cross-dressing. It is also imperative for female audience members as they seek to answer fundamental questions about their own *raison d’être* in their everyday lives. Adopting this perspective is a critical step towards empowering them to reevaluate the notions of gender and sexuality, both within the theatrical realm

and in real-life situations. Such a shift in perspective aims to lead them towards realising a personal truth that diverges from the traditional narrative of a happy, yet constrained, marriage as portrayed in *Twelfth Night*. It is about encouraging them to envision and embrace a reality where their identities and freedoms are not limited by conventional societal expectations, but are instead defined by their own unique experiences, choices, and aspirations.

WORKS CITED

- Abe, Nozomi. "The Studio Life and *Twelfth Night*." Interview with Abe Nozomi. Interviewed by Bo Ram Choi, 14 July 2014.
- "Aquirax Uno". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Last updated 14 November 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aquirax_Uno. Accessed 31 May 2023.
- Buckley, Sandra. "A Short History of the Feminist Movement in Japan." *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*. Eds. Joyce Gelb and Marian Palley. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 150-186.
- Davis, Tracy and Thomas Postlewait. *Theatricality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Hara. "Two performances I saw." *Something Special*. 21 November 2011. <http://blog.naver.com/foxsong68/143916733>. Accessed 26 October 2022.
- Harris, Timothy. "In the Nihongo Words of the Bard ... : Kazuko Matsuoka discusses challenges she faces translating Shakespeare." *The Japanese Times*. 13 March 2002. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2002/03/13/stage/in-the-nihongo-words-of-the-bard/#.WBfbc2LTIU>. Accessed 31 March 2023.
- Howard, Jean E. *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Hwang, Yu-jin. "A Meaningful Visit of a Japanese Production in Korea." *Herald Corporation*. 29 November 2011. http://news.heraldcorp.com/view.php?ud=20111128000698&md=20120317053634_BL. Accessed 30 April 2023.
- Kurata Jun. "Akira Uno and Jun Kurata: Interview with Uno Akira and Kurata Jun." *A Midsummer Night's Dream and Twelfth Night*. 8 November 2011. http://blog.naver.com/studio_life/90128040970. Accessed 15 March 2023.
- Kurata Jun. "The Studio Life's *Twelfth Night*." Interview with Kurata Jun. Interviewed by Bo Ram Choi. Translated by Abe Nozomi. 2 August 2015. The National Theatre, London.
- McLelland, Mark J. *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*. Surrey: Curzon, 2005.
- McLelland, Mark J. "The 'Beautiful Boy' in Japanese Girls' Manga." *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*. Ed. Toni Johnson-Woods. New York: Continuum, 2010. 77-92.
- Mezur, Katherine. *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies: Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Neely, Carol. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2004.

- Nouryeh, Andrea. "Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage." *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance*. Ed. Dennis Kennedy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 254-269.
- Prough, Jennifer. "Shōjo Manga in Japan and Abroad." *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*. Ed. Toni Johnson-Woods. New York: Continuum, 2010. 92-108.
- Rackin, Phyllis. *Shakespeare and Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Sauter, Willmar. *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Eds. Anne Barton, Frank Kermode, G. Blakemore Evans, Hallett Smith, Harry Levin, Herschel Baker, and Marie Edel. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Shamoon, Deborah. *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012.
- Shapiro, Michael. *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- "Shotacon". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. 23 December 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shotacon>. Accessed 22 December 2022.
- Sohn, Dong-ho. "Object in the Intercultural Shakespeare: Studio Life Company's 2011 *Twelfth Night* in Seoul." *Comparative Study of World Literature* 39 (2012): 251-266.
- Sorgenfrei, Carol. "Alluring Ambiguity: Gender and Cultural Politics in Modern Japanese Performance." *New Theatre Quarterly* 30.4 (2014): 341-351.
- Studio Life. "Corporate Profile," *Studio Life*. 2007. <http://www.studio-life.com/english.html>. Accessed 29 August 2022.
- Suzuki, Tadashi. *Culture Is the Body: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*. Trans. K. H. Steel. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2015.
- Takakuwa, Yoko. 2000. "(En)gendering Desire in Performance: *King Lear*, Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, Tadashi Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear*." *Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Performance*. Ed. Jean E. Edward. New York: Routledge, 2000. 35-49.
- Tomoko, Aoyama. "Male Homosexuality as Treated by Japanese Women Writers." *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*. Ed. Gavan McCormack. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 186-204.
- Treat, John Whittier. "Yoshimoto Banana's Kitchen, or the Cultural Logic of Japanese Consumerism." *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*. Eds. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran. Richmond: Curzon, 1995. 274-298.
- Trumbach, Randolph. "From Age to Gender, c. 1500-1750: From the Adolescent Male to the Adult Effeminate Body." *The Routledge History of Sex and The Body: 1500 to the Present*. Eds. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher. London, New York: Routledge, 2013. 123-141.
- Uno, Akira. *Lylic Illustration, or Girls through the Looking-Glass*. Tokyo: Sanrio, 1986.