Gender Performativity in Japan

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Abstract

This paper explores gender issues Japanese daily life or traditional and contemporary shows. Specifically, it looks at gender politics in a number of performing arts, highlighting ways in which humor constructs the feminine. Like eroticism, humor builds on a fascination with the real ambiguity of gender; and reciprocally gender is sensually and humorously fashioned. Humorous performances arise from the aesthetic disturbance or subversion of historically specific gender prescriptions, just as the child develops role-playing strategies to understand what makes a male and a female body, game or activity before assimilating the gender divisions that prevail in her world. Gender is understood in this paper as a sort of unfinished picture that people have fun crafting.

Keywords: humor; gender; performance; Japan.

Gender politics in *kyōgen* and *kabuki*

The classical theatrical genres that are still performed today are known as *sarugaku* and *kabuki*. Gaining popularity throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the two types of *sarugaku*, *nō* and *kyōgen*, acquired their present form between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. *Nō* is Japanese drama which is now played worldwide, whilst *kyōgen*, the comic plays derived from it, have seldom made it outside Japan. *Nō* and *kyōgen* are traditionally executed by different actors but on the same stage and within the same program (typically three *nō*plays interspersed with two *kyōgen*plays today, though programs were longer in olden days). The former is a highly stylized, dramatic opera in which performers wear masks and dance along minimalist accompaniments (see for example Tyler 2005); the latter is comedy, without music and usually much less emphasis on dancing. *Kyōgen* rather relies on punning, onomatopoeia and physical action to poke fun at human foibles. It is also concerned with the everyday life of the masses, as opposed to *nō*'s representations of elite lifestyles. Across the small *kyōgen* repertoire of between 200 and 260 plays still enacted today, humorous forms range from mild social satires and farces to more subtle, gender-based comedies. Thus if monks and feudal lords (*daimyō*) were popular targets, somewhat shrewder entertainment staged psychological haggling between husband and wife. In *Lacquer Craftsman* (*Nushi*) for instance, the husband makes every effort to welcome his master and yet the wife, fearing that the master might rival her man, attempts to trick him (Kato 1997: 119−127; Brandon 2002: 176; Wells and Milner Davis 2006; Wells 2006). Here the female orientation to maintaining harmony in the household humorously clashes with the male objective of integration to wider society. And when husbands and wives fight on stage, usually the woman wins… so that the *kyōgen*repertoire enacts for Wells and Milner Davis (2006: 147) a rueful and deeply comic acknowledgement of reality. No matter what the supposed social power of the man, either at the time of the composition of these plays or even now, his wife still had then - and has today - the power to make his life miserable. *Kyōgen* simply acknowledges this as fact, and as cause for laughter.

In this view humor acts on gender conventions (here the institution of marriage) to destabilize patriarchal stereotypes and insinuate that the nature of husband-wife relations is in reality more unconventionalor less unilateral than the *doxa* acknowledges. Today in the same vein, Japanese women joke that a good husband makes a lot of money and is never home (Ellington 2009: 202).

On stage, the humorous impact of such questioning of gender roles is enhanced by the fact that men often play female roles. Of even more spectacular relevance to constructions of gender indeed are the *kabuki* theatre and its *onnagata* tradition, comparable to the ancient Greek practice of male actors in female roles, to Shakespeare's boys as female protagonists or to the Beijing opera's "female role specialists" (*dan*). By the early seventeenth century the masses turned away from *sarugaku*, which had become leisure of the ruling class, and instead attended the *kabuki* instigated by a former shrine maiden, Okuni. In 1603, her troupe of female performers was so successful in the capital that *onna* (women's) *kabuki* flourished, until the Tokugawa Shogunate decided in 1629 to ban women not only from *kabuki* but from all other theatrical performances. This decision was motivated by disquieting connections between *onna kabuki* and the prostitutes it advertised in the pleasure quarter of Yoshiwara. However the attempt to eradicate female prostitution from the theatre failed, as the male adolescents between the age of thirteen and fifteen who replaced women were in turn involved in male prostitution

(*danshō*). Twenty to thirty years after the ban of *onnakabuki*, *wakashū* (young men's) *kabuki* was also prohibited to give rise to *yarō* (men's) *kabuki*. The older troupes of *yarōkabuki* were forced, besides, to reduce their physical attractiveness. At this period, *kabuki* would evolve from dance and mime to drama (Jackson 1989: 461; McDonald 1994: 24; Kato 1997: 146−147; Mezur 2005: 17).

How *onnagata*fashion Woman

Noteworthy in this brief overview of the origins of *kabuki* is the institution of the *onnagata*, male impersonator of female roles who appeared in 1629 as a result of a political maneuver, and is still very much alive in the all-male *kabuki* that nowadays predominates in Japan. *Onnagata* actors strive to enact, not the essence of femininity but a highly stylized female-likeness: literally the "form" (*kata*) of the female (*onna*) gender. Although this fictional persona favors patriarchal values, it has been respectful of women –possibly because the artistic status and reputation of the *onnagata* depends on the credibility with which they capture, not female characters but a male-body-styled vision of "womanliness" (*onnarashisa*) (Leiter 2002: 213). The *onnagata*aesthetic principles specifically refer to the nostalgic "erotic allure" (*iroke*) of the adolescent boy (*wakashū*). Due to their young age the *wakashū*or *shōnen* are not always clearly distinguishable from girls. They are girlboys. And the *kata* that are reproduced today were instigated by *wakashū kabuki* since it displayed, in addition to some elements of *kyōgen*, this gender *ambiguity* arising from the bodies of "beautiful boys" (*bishōnen*). Contemporary *onnagata*deliberately cultivate a fantasy, a "lie" (*uso*) that goes beyond the binary of male and female toward *imagining* reality rather than emulating it; they perform according to the "beauty of stylization" (*yōshikibi*) and the "beauty of the artificial" (*jinkō no bi*) a female-likeness which appears uncertain, porous, ambiguous (*aimai*) and transformative. So the *onnagata* exploit their own physical limitations to fabricate, in collaboration with spectators who picture a male body beneath the feminine costume, an aesthetics of the artifice rejecting realism and realizing instead the potentials of invention and *exaggeration*. Through the same kind of sophisticated codes that Barthes (1993: 874) praises in Chinese theatre, the *onnagata*"magnify" (*ōkisasuru*) their postures, gestures, costumes, make-up, accessories, vocal performances and so forth, which together participate in the representation of otherworldly, extra-ordinary gender acts –what they call "made-up things" (*tsukutta mono*). Hence the *onnagata*often refer to their roles as "exaggerated beings" (*kyōchōshitamono*). By partially obscuring their male bodies beneath, they produce a stylized abstraction which disrupts sexed bodies and gender roles, questions and subvertsthe male/female dichotomy and eventually dismantles the illusion of a natural gender identity, of a female essence or ideal womanliness. The "fascination of the *onnagata*" (*onnagata no miryoku*) appears with this choreographed, ambivalently gendered sensuality (*onnagata no iroke*).

To put it succinctly then, the *kata* of the *onna*gata emphasize form over mimetic representation of female-likeness, and in so doing denaturalize gender norms, thereby defying socially prescribed behaviors and reasoning such as "opposites attract." The Japanese verb *kabuku*, from which *kabuki* perhaps derives, means "to shift off center," to "be outside the norm." Based on the young male body, this stylized fiction of Woman distances itself from reality and plays with the illusion of surface appearances toward a wider interpretation of gender (Mezur 2005). The fact that female roles in *kabuki* were never performed in search for an ideal Woman or in imitation of real women does not imply that

these roles have no impact on reality; on the contrary, it indicates that gender can be realistically envisaged as a series of creative acts (such as humorous acts) which repeatedly perform unfixed male and female identities. For example the impersonators of "male roles" (*otokoyaku*), in the all-female Takarazuka revue, train hard to accomplish sublime forms of masculinity (Robertson 1989, 1998).

Even if the combination of certain mimetic and verbal forms of representation in *kabuki* theatre corresponds to what Freud (1960: 192, 200) called "ideational mimetics," the *onnagata*'s (re)creation of one gender is unlike parody or travesty in the Freudian sense of a "degradation" (*Herabsetzung*) of people and objects worthy of respect. Rather, the *onnagata* is engaged in the allegorical performance of female-likeness. Sometimes perceptible in codified speech and body language, humor actively participates in the construction of such allegory, perhaps on two levels.

The first level might sound amusing today, but once contextualized it takes on a serious air. Women of the early Tokugawa period (1603−1867) were encouraged to replicate the ambiguous mannerisms of the *onnagata*, and the *bishōnen*became ideals of beauty for both men and women (Robertson 1998: 14; Mezur 2005: 3, 54). As Robertson (1991: 106) explains:

… women's hypothetical achievement of "female" gender was tantamount to their impersonation of female-like males, who in turn, were not impersonating particular females but rather enacting an idealized version (and vision) of female-likeness.

Given stereotypes executed by male actors stood as arbiters of taste, driving forces for women's fashion, upper-middle class women began in the early eighteenth century to outnumber men in the *kabuki* audience. Ironically, the *onnagata* used to find inspiration amongst the dress of high-class prostitutes (Jackson 1989: 461). The influence of male "women" upon the collective imagination of how a woman should look and behave cannot be underestimated −even today, and even in a humorous mode since the patterns of parody from good-humored caricature to the utmost grotesque only amplify, in the end, real features. Parallels between these dialectics of gender appearance and current adoptions of fashions and lifestyles that circulate in the media certainly abound… along with the very same ironies. To cite but two brief examples, take the development of black and white films in 1920s US, when street fashions moved toward screen images so that "color drained out of elegance, and was replaced by the whole black and white spectrum" (Ewen and Ewen 1982: 201). Or take designer Christian Lacroix declaring to *Vogue* that "it's terrible to say, very often the most exciting outfits are from the poorest people" (Klein 2001: 74). Borrowing from either wealthy prostitutes, black-and-white images or people in rags, fashion exposes gender as a performance inspired by the marginal, the liminal, the extreme, in short *onnagata*-like ambiguities and amplifications. In both the *onnagata* costume and the fashionable dress resides the sarcastic pride of incarnating what most people are not, yet may feel attracted to, or tempted to be.

The second level is more directly concerned with the humorous potential for gender confusion that a construct such as *onnagata* is bound to entail. For example, the play *Shibaraku* was originally designed for a very masculine hero, who in a later feminized version is performed by an *onnagata*. This hero exits the stage via the traditional runway (*hanamichi*) in a typical male style first; but then, realizing with a start that he is a woman, becomes embarrassed and runs off in the female fashion (Leiter 2002: 224).

Laughter in the crowd: the indeterminacy of gender boundaries arouses "good silly humor" (Dunning 1985). This kind of embarrassment establishes complicity with an audience who is knowledgeable about the codes of *kabuki* as a theatre of men playing women; and in a more fundamental way it generates humor through gender "trouble" –through a disconcerting impression of wrongness and instability, for the feminine can no longer be fixed or taken for granted. The *onnagata* is sorely conscious of his acting the womanly. On the stage he knows that he is, always already, becoming a woman. And this woman transcends femininity in ways that female spectators cannot, hence admire. Two points can be made about this becoming. First, it is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's (1986) famous allegation that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. If gender is in this view an acquisition, a cultural construction of sex, something that one becomes and can never just "be", then it should be understood not as a static entity but as a repeated and incessant activity. Second, the *onnagata*'s constant state of becoming makes her the incarnation of humor, the humorous person par excellence or for Noguez (2004: 80) the "impossible person" −she exists only virtually, like an asymptote. And we can only be to this impossible humorist what the *philosophos* is to the *sophia*, dwelling in the distance of the *philein*. We draw nearer and nearer to her without ever reaching her. What Noguez calls "humor" is this feeling of impossibility experienced to the point of uncontrollable laughter. Critchley (2002: 2) concurs that "humour is a nicely impossible object for a philosopher. But herein lies its irresistible attraction." Irresistible like a fit of the giggles in front of the conceivable yet unachievable, in front of the visible yet ungraspable, in front of the fruits and water that Tantalus can only desire… humor reveals what is too perfect to be possible, or too good to be true.

What humor does to Woman

As stated above, the audience recognizes real female traits in the gender portrayed on stage, thus participating in the creation of the feminine identity. The example of classic Japanese theatre, which could be expanded to virtually all representational acts, shows that ideas about what it is to be a woman result from the collaboration of artists and models on a stylized construct. The humor of *kyōgen* or *kabuki* illustrates a performative process of gender creation. This process relates to the notion of "gender trouble" running through the paper. The meaning of trouble, that of a serious problem, can be perverted into its opposite, that of a funny situation (e.g. "Ranma is in trouble!"). As such, it reflects the ambiguity and performativity of gender-based humor. Gender trouble is also an allusion to Judith Butler's (1990) influential work. And with a little stretch of the imagination, Butler and the audience of *kabuki* together laugh in the face of serious gender categories. If the expression "female trouble" is for Butler (1990: xxx-xxxi) a bad joke according to which "being female is a natural indisposition," the trouble also refers to a crucial instability in the concept of Woman. Butler believes that gender is not something that simply is; instead it appears "manufactured through a sustained set of *acts*" (Butler 1990: xv, *my emphasis*), just like *onnagata*acts. Following Foucault's (1994: 1004) genealogical approach, gender is not so much defined on the basis of natural causes than from the very expressions that are said to be its result. Claiming that the gendered body is performative is akin to proposing that it has no ontological status apart from the plurality of acts that constitutes its reality. That is, gender proves to be a "doing" that shapes the identity it is purported to be. Hence Butler (1990: 45) does not argue toward the artificiality of gender, but on the contrary develops a "genealogy of gender ontology" according to which [g]ender is the *repeated* stylization of the body, a set of *repeated* acts within a highly

rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being [*my emphases*].

Depicted here is the consolidation of the female gender through rehearsals, reiterations, insistences, repetitions. Doing gender implies re-doing it, over and over again, diligently until automatisms are acquired and the performance looks and feels "natural." Gender requires that the performance be repeated in a plurality of social rituals, which re-enact a set of meanings already established. Repetition is then "the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation," and as Butler (1990: 191) continues:

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender … must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

Consequently for Butler the construction of gender is by definition ideological, inasmuch as it conceals its genesis in the mask of the ordinary, i.e. in a prosaic and tacit manner. Such construction is credible to the extent that it compels our belief in its naturalness. In other words, people are incited to believe in the necessity and reality of what is, in fact, a cultural fiction. The feminist backdrop will inspire three remarks.

It can be argued first that humor results from a collapse of this belief, from the realization in a burst of laughter that the existence of male and female categories is incredible. Men under female disguises (the *onnagata*, the transvestite) parody the misleading notion of an "original" gender. In reality, not only does such imitation reveal the imitative dimension of gender itself, but at the same time it highlights its contingency (e.g., Butler 1990: 187). That is, the discovery that the relation between the sex of performers (as biological givens) and their gender (as performance) is contingent creates surprise and at best this "disappointed expectation" which defined, in Cicero's *DeOratore*, the typical joke (Critchley 2002: 1). If following Critchley one accepts that humor occurs in the discrepancy between the way things are and the way they are represented, between reality and pretense, then by implication it will occur in the revelation that gender is not as natural and necessary as it may look. Because there is more to gender than meets the eye, humor neither reinforces, nor confirms the legitimacy of discourses on natural gender. It is quite the opposite −by staging illegitimate women in *kyōgen*, *kabuki* or other cross-dressing manifestations it deconstructs gender as a performance, of which women like men become aware in their real lives. Spectators laugh as they identify comparable acts within their own experiences. The humorous tale tears up another tale, that of a naturally gendered reality, and in doing so demonstrates its power of de-fetishization and why not catharsis: the artificiality of gender is made suddenly and blatantly visible.

The second remark has to do with Butler's insistence on repetition. In French, repetition can be a synonym of rehearsal, and even become a "running joke" in the humorous context (*comique de répétition*). To be sure, there is much fun and much repetition in the rehearsals of the *onnagata*. They spend a great deal of time and energy in the meticulous reproduction of traditional patterns, the *kata* of female-likeness. Their skills and reputation will rest in part upon the accuracy with which they repeat the *kata* that past generations, long before them, endlessly executed. In this connection the humorous aspects of *kabuki*, transpiring for instance in the *Shibaraku*play, hint at Bergson's (2007) analysis despite

the criticisms it received and with which I would certainly sympathize.[2] For Bergson the person who gives the impression of becoming a thing, say a fake woman or an animated doll, embodies the comic figure. Likewise, in the effects produced by repetition he sees evidence of the mechanical dimension of humor. If doing gender entails acquiring automatisms indeed (so that doing parades as being), then an extreme stylization or personification such as the *onnagata*'s will somewhat verge on objectification. According to Bergson, this objectification is likely to look amusing, entertaining. The early *kabuki* was based on mimicry, and the transvestite in a farce happens to make us laugh just as a human puppet or automaton would. Funny scenes routinely feature people who merge with, or turn into objects or machines. One may think of the hilarious scene of the feeding machine in Chaplin's *ModernTimes*, or classic American cartoons such as *RoadRunner* and *TomandJerry* in which neither the coyote nor the cat will ever catch their prey. They will be crushed or squeezed into inhuman shapes instead (cubes, lids, etc.).

The third remark unites the logic of objectification to that of gender trouble. It draws on the assumption that we often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it terrifies us. Laughter unveils an anxiety of accessing the troubling knowledge that gender may be more complex than its reassuring icons. Gregor's transformation into an ignominious insect in Kafka's (2009) *Metamorphosis*, for instance, belongs to this kind of grotesque that confuses the reader and makes her question what she knows about the world. By the same token the laugh of a *kyōgen* spectator contains interrogations such as: "what on earth is a woman?" With laughter comes the anguish of uncertainty. Tickle a baby's belly and watch her face and body shake with the spams of hilarity; after a while, as she struggles to breathe, you will read fear in her eyes. "What is happening to me?", she must be thinking; and years later, during an orgasm, "am I dying?" The superiority of Bataille's (1970) theorization of laughter over Bergson's resides in the discernment of, and elaboration on this torment. In short, for this is not the place to expand on it, laughter is for him an act of non-discursive knowledge through which we achieve communication. This type of knowledge is only accessible through identification with the experience of the Other or mental projection of oneself into a traumatic episode (what he calls the "inner experience"). Death is a salient example: we cannot know much about our own death but still attend a sacrifice or any other distressing manifestation, and communicate our anxiety with fellow witnesses. As such, laughter has a function of cohesion that characterizes human interaction. The final section will also suggest that it assaults and destabilizes gender conventions, as if to ensure that they are strong enough.

Gender politics in *senryū* and *rakugo*

Senryū is a comic verse form of 5-7-5 syllables that originated in the eighteenth century. Its 5-7-5 sequence is identical to *haiku*, which is better known outside Japan and corresponds to the first half (*hokku*) of a longer poetic structure (5-7-5-7-7) called *waka*. Despite similar origins and developments such as the sixteenth-century, multi-authored *haikai-renga*(*haikai*roughly means "humor") the witty elements and modern language of *senryū*are today what distinguishes them from the more seriously crafted *haiku* (Oda 2006; Kobayashi 2006). Whilst *senryū*are not as popular as *haiku* in Japan, they are still composed and published by hundreds of specialized *senryū*societies in magazines, regular newsletters, and up to five times a week in most major newspapers in Japan. There are anthologies of *senryū*, written for example as humorous responses to the AumShinrikyō sect (Gardner 2002; Oda

2006). The ironies and mockeries of *senryū* constitute a mine of information on Japanese perceptions of gender and regulations of sexuality. Traditionally most *senryū* were about sexual relationships –many portrayed Yoshiwara, or dealt with the *Shōgun*'s servants and their aphrodisiacs, dildos and contraceptives (Kato 1997: 205). Here again humorous discourses have reflected sexual norms through history. In 1878 a verse could poke fun at the law's arbitrary distinction between acceptable and unacceptable sexuality: "the grappling ginger is allowed and the chrysanthemum forbidden" (*dakimyōgayurushitekikuokinjirare*). Grappling ginger and chrysanthemum symbolized the female genitalia and male anus respectively. In the latter part of the Meiji (1868−1912) period however, this kind of humor was regarded as obscene and homosexuality in *senryū* "moved gradually but unmistakably towards the margins of discourse" (Pflugfelder 1999: 164, 203).

An extended form of *senryū*, the "story" (*kobanashi*), shared the same predilection for the violation of sexual customs. The *kobanashi* gave birth to comic monologues that rely on punning (*share*) and are called *rakugo*. The roots of *rakugo* can be traced back to the end of the seventeenth century, and it remains popular today. Wearing a *kimono* and sitting on his knees, the performer of *rakugo*switches from one character to another in imaginary settings and conversations (e.g. between *boke*and *tsukkomi*, see 1.3). As in *manzai*, *rakugo*is full of spoonerisms, comical confusions and razor-sharp sketches of everyday situations. Humor in Ancient Greece belonged to the established male order (Billig 2005: 47). Similarly, women are almost exclusively excluded from *rakugo*. The few female storytellers who performed in the past enjoyed little success and, at least in the 1970s, were regarded as "totally useless as *rakugoka*" (Sweeney 1979: 34). There are still very few today. A man imitating a woman's voice is perceived as amusing, whereas the converse imitation sounds horrible. "In Japanese culture," Ōshima (2006: 100) notes, "performance activities have normally been considered the province of men." Men are believed to do the female gender more convincingly than women themselves. As a result but unlike *kabuki*, male dominance in *rakugo*performance is produced by, and at the same time produces sexist penchants. Public humor tends to turn women into objects of derision. Ōshima (2006: 107-108) provides an example of the *neta* jokes that performers use before the actual *rakugo*:

Recent new technology has developed machines that talk. There is a set of scales at the gym that tells you your weight when you stand on it. When someone stands on the measure, it says, "Pi pipi… You are… sixty-five kilograms." Once when a middle-aged woman stood on the scales it said, "Pi pipi… Please, one person at a time.

Ōshima explains that the joke plays on the stereotype of the Japanese middle-aged woman who is considered heavy, overly loud and motherly. But on a less immediate level of reading it also constructs, in the logic of the *onnagata*'s exaggerations, a fictionof the womanly that is only remotely connected to real women. The teasing character of this story functions as a *kata* which deliberately confuses gender expectations to reveal an ambiguous, extra-human gender. For such heavy weight is more easily attributed to either men or mannish women (say, an obese person or a female bodybuilder). The humorous narrative stigmatizes aging women toward the margins of the womanly, and more explicitly toward female-unlikeness rather than the *onnagata*'s female-likeness (*onnarashisa*). This form of teasing among others shows that the language of humor is quite strongly performative, acting for instance on the relationship between gender and sex (and in other cases sexuality) to separate the

womanly from the unwomanly. Along Bergson's intuition of humor as mechanization of people, the target of the joke is here ridiculed on the basis of her disqualification from a certain standard of femininity, hence from normal humanity −she is too heavy to be just one individual, and embodies for a machine which "tells the truth" a woman *and* a man.

In Critchley's (2002: 45, 51) view, the body that is the object and subject of humor is accordingly *abject*, alien, not human enough. He refers to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* which contains "microscopically detailed," excessively sensuous impressions of the body, whose imperfections become grotesque. The breast of a female giant looks monstrous and in Swift's own term "nauseous"; so closely described, it encourages misogyny. By the same token Freud (1960: 76) evokes tendentious jokes toward women who are "not quite women," specifically toward unsexy bodily excesses:

Marie Wilt was a great singer, famous, however, for the compass not only of her voice. She suffered the humiliation of having the title of a play based on Jules Verne's well-known novel used as an allusion to her misshapen figure: "Round the Wilt in 80 Days" [the German for "world" is "*Welt*"]. Or "Every fathom a queen," a modification of Shakespeare's familiar "Every inch a king." The allusion to this quotation was made with reference to an aristocratic and over-life-size lady.

Sexist humor is nevertheless sensual and sexual in psychoanalysis, insofar as the abject represents what simultaneously repulses and attracts us (e.g. Kristeva 1980). With regard to much of Japanese eroticism, a parallel can be drawn with the persuasive power of the works of Sade. Whilst laughter has often been interpreted as the release of a tension, which makes a lot of sense on a physiological plane, Freud (1960) sees quite a distinct channeling in accordance with the pleasure principle −laughter triggers the satisfaction of a drive that saves the subject from indulging in a less adequate, more disturbing demonstration of affection. Her "potential energy" (to borrow from physics) is in this way safely evacuated in hilarity. The spheres of sexuality and obscenity elicit comic pleasure, if not sexual arousal, because "they can show human beings in their dependence on bodily needs (degradation) or they can reveal the physical demands lying behind the claim of mental love (unmasking)" (Freud 1960: 222). It is on this Freudian dissection of the allusive joke that this paper will be brought to a close.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to link the metaphor of the stage to feminist theory, via what has been jokingly called "gender trouble". Trouble refers to a state of irresolution, of hesitancy, of anxiety. The same sort of anxiety is manifested in laughter. The trouble with gender, therefore, emerges from the smiles and laughs that gags elicit.

To recapitulate, the humor produced by gender confusion is performative, meaning that it contributes to designing and refining gender categories. The feminine and the masculine are *yin* and *yang* defining each other along exaggerated models or caricatures, which reinforce the very oppositions that condition their existence. Thus the credibility of the *onnagata* is enhanced by his very excesses: his ambiguously gendered body radiates a metaphysical kind of sensuality (*iroke*) which appears more deeply human, somehow post-human. The last two examples of obese women would place them in the unglamorous but not less confusing extra-human category. As the last section infers, sexist or "dirty" jokes show that

a great deal of humor is concerned with the ordering and structuring of gender, with the delineation of clear boundaries between the male and the female −even if this implies, as the characters of Ranma and the *onnagata* epitomize, their deliberate blurring in an attempt to fully grasp what differentiates them as well as what delimits straight from gay sexualities.

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