Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan

Theater, Gender, and Nationalism

Ayako Kano

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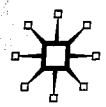

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CHAPTER 1

ACTING LIKE A WOMAN

ACTING LIKE A WOMAN DOES NOT COME NATURALLY. It has to be taught, learned, rehearsed, and repeated. It does not arise from a moment of inspiration, but from many years of persistent inculcation. In an acting woman, the cultural and social desires of an age are concentrated, molding her every gesture, every glance. In turn, her movements and words, watched and heard, applauded and critiqued, enforce and revise those desires. Of all acting women, it is the professional actress who most clearly embodies the fantasies and fears of the age. Hence, at the most general level, this book is about acting like a woman in modern Japan, while at the most specific level it is about two actresses who were pioneers in channeling and shaping new desires in a rapidly changing society.[1]

In the past decade, it has become almost fashionable to say simply that "gender *is* performance."[2] Whatever sexual difference might exist on the biological level, gender difference is a cultural and social construct that may be understood as "performance." Thus, one might say, "gender exists only in so far as it is perceived; and the very components of perceived gender—gait, stance, gesture, deportment, vocal pitch and intonation, costume, accessories, coiffure—indicate the performative nature of the construct."[3] Gender is, in this view, a performance that is learned, rehearsed, and given to an audience to be perceived. It is presumably also a performance that can be given differently, with different gestures, intonation, accessories, for a substantially different effect on the audience.[4]

Yet this notion of gender as performance must be somewhat qualified. First, to say that gender is performance can make the whole problem of "being a woman" and "acting like a woman" seem like a question of costume choice: "If you don't like your gender, change into a pair of pants!" Most people would agree that a change of costume might make you a different kind of woman, but that you would be a woman nonetheless. Part of the problem,

then, is that despite feminist attempts to separate gender from sex, gender continues to be construed in binary terms: feminine or masculine, woman or man.

Another part of the problem lies with the metaphor of "performance" itself: What does it mean to say that gender is performance? If we are performing gender, are we doing so consciously or unconsciously? Are we entirely free to choose how to act, or is there a prior script that constrains our performance? How far should we take the metaphor of performance?[5]

One answer would be: not too far. In *Bodies that Matter,* Judith Butler clarifies this point: Saying gender is performative is different from saying "that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night."[6] So it is more complicated than keeping skirts in one closet and a pair of pants in another. Butler stresses that the *performativity* of gender has little to do with the *theatricality* of gender, and that by performativity she means something much closer to a "reiteration of a norm."[7] However, in an earlier essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," and in her subsequent book *Gender Trouble,* Butler's emphasis had been on the possibility of interpreting and enacting gender differently, not confined to the norm: "[G]ender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism."[8] This emphasis on the fluidity of gender had been the main cause of the wide-ranging enthusiasm that greeted *Gender Trouble.* The enthusiastic (mis)reading of the idea of the performativity of gender was what led Butler to clarify her position subsequently in *Bodies that Matter,* declaring that "this act is not primarily theatrical."[9]

This rejection of "theatricality" is based on an understanding of theater in which an actor is "performing" consciously while on stage but stops doing so when offstage. What would happen to her theory of gender as performance if a different theory of performance were employed? Moreover, if we take seriously the double meaning of "to act," and consider that even when offstage, one is acting in daily life with varying degrees of consciousness, then that understanding of theatricality would not diverge as much from Butler's notion of performativity.[10]

Butler writes about gender: "Its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity."[11] I choose to read this as an invitation for a not entirely impossible project: the *partial* disclosure of gender's historicity, in the service of a recovery of gender's theatricality. In other words, since gender appears as if it is inevitable and unchangeable only because its historical "origin" remains hidden, to uncover at least part of the historicity of gender is to open up possibilities for gender to be more playful and, indeed, more theatrical.

Such is the purpose of this book. By scrutinizing a specific historical moment in a specific location, I wish to add a few brushstrokes to the often highly

abstract portrait of the relationship between gender and performance. At the same time, by sifting through some of the sedimented historicity of gender, I hope to add a few handfuls of sand in the direction that would dislodge gender's inevitability. The locale is Japan, the historical moment is the turn of the previous century, a moment in which both gender and performance, as well as the relationship between them, registered a recognizable shift. From my vantage point at the turn of another century and at a moment in history in which the performativity and theatricality of gender can be glimpsed again—inside and outside theory books, on stage, on screen, and in the streets—I aspire to trace the beginning of the modern definition of gender and to hasten the demise of understanding "acting like a woman" as that which comes naturally.

The historical link between theater and prostitution is documented in many areas of the globe. Japan is no exception. Advertising their sexual services through sensual and sensational dances, certain women had made the stage their showcase by the early seventeenth century. When scandals and riots involving the ruling classes ensued, the authorities blamed the sellers, rather than the buyers: From 1629 to 1891, women were officially prohibited from performing in theaters. Initially they were replaced by young men, the *wakashu,* akin to the boy-actors in English theater of the Elizabethan period.[12] It soon became apparent, however, that these boys were as prone to igniting scandals and riots as the women, and they were banned from the stage as well. It thus fell upon adult male actors to carry the stage, and to carry the female roles in particular.

Applying thick white powder and rouge to their faces, donning elaborate costumes and heavy wigs, forcing their shoulders back and walking with bent knees, these actors, called *onnagata,* or *oyama,* cultivated a style of acting that represented idealized femininity by concealing one set of somatic signs and inscribing another. So highly valued was their portrayal of femininity that women from the pleasure quarters began to imitate them. Femininity was a set of signs that circulated from the pleasure quarters to the theater and back.[13] Prostitution continued to be associated with the theater, with the male actors available as sexual partners for male patrons, but the practice of *onnagata* eventually led to the development of a stylized art and made idealized femininity something that was represented by men.

All of this started to change in the late nineteenth century. But how and why did this change occur? In the years between 1629 and 1868, Japan was to a large extent politically isolated from the rest of the world, maintaining limited commercial relations with a few nations. When a new political regime seized power in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, a period of state-building and

nation-building commenced, the gates were opened to Western influence, and women entered the theater as part of this process. Yet the introduction of women to the stage was no simple matter.

Theater was one of the most conspicuous sites for the new government to display Japan's legitimacy as an advanced nation, one that could not only avoid colonization by nations such as the United States, Britain, Germany, and France, but one that would eventually become a colonial power itself. Theater was also one of the most visible components of diplomacy—when Japanese government officials traveled to London, Berlin, and Paris, for instance, they were ushered to the opera houses for cultural entertainment. But where were the Japanese opera houses to which European and American visitors could be invited? One possibility was the *noh* theater, designated as official music (*shikigaku*) under the Tokugawa government, but the slow and dignified movements of *noh* actors tended to put the uninitiated spectator to sleep. The *kabuki* theater, on the other hand, was popular, eye-catching, and entertaining, but it had its own problems. William Elliot Griffis aptly described the condition of Japanese *kabuki* in his journal dated April 12, 1871:

> The house was crowded. The acting was fair. The play was full of love and murder, with many amusing incidents. . . . Clandestine meeting of wife and old lover. Jealous husband detects paramours. Murder of the guilty pair. The husband finds that the pipe-mender [i.e., the lover] is his dear friend in humble disguise. Remorse. Commits *hara-kiri*. Finale. . . . The interest centers in the bloody scene, when heads, trunks, blood, and limbs lie around the stage promiscuously. The deliberate whetting of the sword with hone, dipper, bucket, and water in sight of the frantic guilty pair, the prolongation of the sharpening and the bloody scene to its possible limit of time—twenty minutes by the watch—make it seem very ludicrous to me, though the audience look on breathless. During this time all talking, eating, and attention to infants cease. . . . The theatre is large, but of a rather primitive order of architecture. . . . As a rule, the better class of Japanese people do not attend the theatres for moral reasons, and as examples to their children. The influences of the stage are thought to be detrimental to virtue.[14]

These were precisely the concerns that led to a government-led effort to reform the theater. With the support of the ruling elite and the explicit purpose of raising the status of theater so that it would reflect Japan's new status in the world, the Theater Reform Society (Engeki Kairyōkai) was founded in 1886. Replacing *onnagata* with actresses was among the top items on the group's agenda, along with improving the quality of plays and building modern theater buildings.[15]

Among the first results of theater reform was the improvement in the status of actors. Before the Meiji Restoration, actors had been legally designated outcasts, and despite the great popularity and prestige of a few theater practitioners, most were seen as no better than "river-bed beggars" (*kawara kojiki*). In 1871 the status of "untouchable" (*eta*) and "non human" (*hinin*) was abolished, and freedom of choosing one's occupation and residence was declared. Actors were freed from their social status as outcasts and outlaws and were incorporated into the newly established status of the common people (*heimin*). The government also issued an order in 1882 to require all actors to be licensed by the state (specifically the police) and to pay taxes.[16] It is also customary in theater history to regard the emperor's attendance of a *kabuki* performance in 1887 as a ground-breaking event that legitimized the *kabuki* theater in the eyes of the state and confirmed the status of actors as cultural representatives of the nation, rather than social outcasts. This imperial spectatorship (*tenran kabuki*) is cited as the Theater Reform Society's major concrete achievement.[17]

The Theater Reform Society's efforts were part of the general effort at "reform" (*kairyō*) that preoccupied various sectors of society: reform of clothing, reform of hair style, reform of dining habits, reform of education, reform of housing. It was no coincidence that these were the same years in which the government was trying to revise unequal treaties with various Western powers.

Like theater, women were the target of reform as well as spectacles on display. When intellectuals and government officials traveled abroad in the early years of the new regime, they could not help but notice that women were prominent in social settings in Europe and the United States. Women were ushered first through doorways, danced with men in public, and commanded attention as hostesses at parties.[18] This was terribly shocking, but it showed that women needed to be shown in public in Japan as well. In November of 1883, the government initiated a series of Western-style balls at the newly built Rokumeikan mansion, with politicians and their companions, among them current and former geisha, awkwardly waltzing in long gowns. Pulled by their own wishes for greater roles in society, women were also pushed into the limelight as part of government policy.

In the midst of these social, cultural, and political changes stood actresses. During a time when the public regarded women's performance as synonymous with sexual entertainment, these women trained their bodies and minds in order to enter a profession that consisted of nonsexual performance. Challenging the prerogative of the *onnagata* to represent feminine beauty, these women sought to prove that women could act, that they could act like women, and that they could do so better than men. Among those pioneering women who achieved fame and notoriety as performers in the years known as the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) periods were Kawakami Sadayakko and Matsui Sumako. The former was a former geisha who turned to acting while touring the United States with her husband and their ragtag band

of performers. The latter was one of the first actresses trained in a school dedicated to the methods of modern acting and attracted a great deal of attention for her conduct on and off stage.

It is their careers that constitute the core of this book.

What did the increasing visibility and popularity of women like Kawakami Sadayakko and Matsui Sumako signify? Did it contribute to the advance of women into the public sphere by placing women's bodies on stage and giving them a voice? Or did it signal the repressive institution of a definition of gender as naturally grounded in the body rather than constituted in performance? As actresses gained prominence, male performers of female roles did not disappear from the stage, but their significance changed. No longer regarded as the embodiment of ideal femininity, their presence was debated, derided as backward, decadent, even perverse. The rise of the actress, then, brought with it a marginalization of the *onnagata.*

The emergence of the actress and the marginalization of *onnagata* in modern Japan was both a liberating and repressive phenomenon. A definition of "woman" grounded in the physical body was necessary if feminist arguments speeding the rise of the actress were to make any sense. This definition of "woman" was hammered out as part of a contentious process through which Japan became a modern nation-state, and that necessarily excluded certain polymorphous possibilities. This definition was essentialist and expressivist: A certain essence of womanhood was thought to reside in the physical body, and this essence was thought to be expressed outwardly in appearance and behavior. Theatrical performance was also thought to be an expression of this essence. What was lost, negated, repressed in this formation of an essentialist and expressive definition of gender was an earlier model of gender as theatrical accomplishment, which for example saw the *onnagata* as the ideal of womanhood.

The emergence of the actress in modern Japan thus embodies a complex process. The shift in the relationship between gender and performance in fin-de-siècle Japan moved in two directions at once: While it gave rise to feminist discourse, in which theater was involved as a vehicle, it also led to a rigidly essentialist definition of gender, to which theater also contributed.

An instructive parallel can be drawn between the changes taking place in modern Japanese theater and in Renaissance-Restoration theater in England.[19] In both instances, a tradition of using male performers of female roles was replaced by the emergence of the actress.[20] Though much uncertainty remains about the status of gender and sexuality in the Renaissance English theater's use of boy-actors for female roles, the emergence of the actress in Restoration theater can claim many similarities with the Japanese case. It seems to have been "both reactionary and subversive, questioning as well as reinforcing traditional dramatic female stereotypes"—simultaneously allowing women a voice on the public stage as well as leading to greater objectification and heightened voyeurism of the female body.[21] The same assessment could be made about Japanese actresses after the Meiji Restoration.

Part of what makes the Japanese case interesting is that here the transition from male performer of female roles to actress took place in the modern era, about a century ago. This means, first of all, that many primary materials are available, if not always easy to locate, and this study makes extensive use of them. It also means that the rise of the actress in Japan is occurring as part of the process of modern nation-building, state-building, and empire-building, a process in which Japan is situated as the latecomer and emulator. The European and North American stage and society are being actively studied, imitated, even parodied. In this context, it is interesting to note that studies of three famous European actresses in the fin-de-siècle, Sarah Bernhardt of France, Ellen Terry of Britain, and Eleonora Duse of Italy, arrive at some of the same conclusions as my study of Japanese actresses—that the increased importance of women on stage parallels the increased objectification and even repression of women in society.[22] The Japanese case stands out, however, because of the increased complexity of the multiple changes occurring simultaneously. It is the temporal conjuncture between the rise of the actress, the decline of the *onnagata,* and the process of transculturation in the context of nation- and empire-building that distinguishes the Japanese case and renders the Japanese actress a unique embodiment of changes going on at various levels: changes in the role of performers in the theater, in the role of women in society, in the role of Japan in the world. This inquiry is therefore situated at the confluence of theater studies, feminist studies, and Japan studies.

Theater, like other cultural practices, powerfully shapes our ideas about gender, sexuality, sex.[23] Theater has also historically been a site for nation-building, as well as a virtual public sphere.[24] Yet, with a few notable exceptions, English-language scholarship on Japanese theater has concentrated on premodern genres, under the unspoken assumption that modern Japanese theater amounts to not much more than an imitation of European theater. Recent scholarship on the Japanese novel has amply demonstrated, however, that such assumptions are misguided and that *modern* Japanese cultural practices offer rich loci for understanding the complexities of cultural colonization and postcoloniality.[25] This book seeks to supplement these readings of modern Japanese culture by paying attention to practices that are nonverbal or quasiverbal—dance and song, gesture and costume—and by focusing on the body, along with language, as the contested locus of modern transculturation.[26]

An incident comes to mind as a perfect illustration of the status of the early twentieth century in the overall history of Japanese theater. In early

1998 I had the chance to catch the tail end of a major exhibit entitled *Japanese Theater in the World,* sponsored by the Japan Foundation in collaboration with the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum. I arrived at the Japan Society in New York on the day before the exhibit closed and spent a blissful afternoon walking through the various galleries, taking copious notes. I was perplexed, however, by the fact that while the catalogue made reference to a section on "Japan in the Modern World: *Shingeki,*" I could not find any exhibits under that rubric. Frustrated, I inquired of a staff member where I could find the section "Japan in the Modern World." "Oh, we took that exhibit down early," came the reply. Seeing my disappointment, the staff member added consolingly: "It was just a bunch of photographs anyway." Disappointed, I went back to contemplating the mysterious *noh* masks, gorgeous *kabuki* costumes, and outlandish *butō* posters: men acting like gods, men acting like women, men acting like ghosts. I could see how "men acting like men" and "women acting like women" would seem slightly less compelling.[27]

While gender and Japanese literature is finally becoming a topic of discussion and research both in Japan and in the United States, gender and Japanese *theater* remains a less-studied topic.[28] Significant scholarship has elucidated the relationship of prostitution, male same-sex relations, and *kabuki* in the Edo period (1603–1868),[29] while questions of gender performativity and sexuality have been explored with respect to the Taishō period and after (1912-), especially in the all-female Takarazuka theater.[30] My topic is situated chronologically between these two: What happens to the relationship of gender, sexuality, and theater in the transition to the modern period? Between the all-male *kabuki* theater in which idealized femininity is portrayed by men, and the all-female Takarazuka theater in which idealized masculinity is portrayed by women, this book focuses on the early years of the so-called modern theaters of *shimpa* and *shingeki,* in which women portraying women is taken to be the self-evident and rarely questioned norm.

By uncovering the historicity of the essentialist definition of gender in which we are still trapped, we can resist the all-too-familiar essentialization of Japanese "womanhood" as unchanging and continuous. In order to move beyond the assumption of such an unchanging and transhistorical femininity, then, we might start from the idea that categories such as "woman" and "femininity," mean radically different things in different historical times.[31] Thus, starting from an assumption of the radical discontinuity of gender categories in history, the first line of inquiry would delineate the specifically *modern* formation of gender categories.[32] The modern formation of the category "woman" is closely related to that of the category "citizen" of the modern nation-state, and this relationship is beginning to be examined by a few scholars in Japan.[33] My analysis builds on theirs and adds to them the consideration of

theater as a space in which the construction of gender and of nationhood proceeded simultaneously.

Yet this kind of questioning of the historicity of categories is not sufficient: Their imbrication need also be analyzed and exposed. Therefore, this study also attempts to deal with a process that might be called "the reproduction of imperialism." Here the pun works with three meanings of the word "reproduction": first, reproduction as replication, that is, how Japan became an imperial power within the context of Western imperial aggression towards Asia; second, reproduction as representation, that is, how imperialism is represented in discursive practices; and third, reproduction as gendered labor, that is, how women's bodies become involved in imperialism. There are many interlocking questions to be considered. How do the logics of imperialism, colonialism, and Orientalism replicate themselves in relation to Japan? What is the role of culture and gender in this process? Cultural practices such as theater, literature, journalism, and scholarship produce collective fantasies and imagined communities. How do people imagine themselves to be members or subjects of a nation when they never meet most of the other members of the nation face to face? And how do people imagine themselves to be members of a colonial empire, how do people place themselves within a hierarchy of the center and the periphery? How do cultural practices shape these images and fantasies and thus contribute to imperialism and colonialism? And what is the role of gender in reproducing imperialism? An empire needs subjects, and subjects need to be reproduced. What can we say about gendered labor, gendered production, and gendered reproduction in the empire? How is imperialism reproduced, as both geopolitical logic and cultural representation, through women's bodies? This present study seeks to be a part of an emerging scholarly effort to answer many of the above questions.[34]

The following pages will take readers into the historical milieu of Meiji Japan. Starting with a survey of the debates surrounding the emergence of the actress in the early twentieth century, chapter 2 maps out a shift taking place in the Meiji period that defined gender and performance in a way that necessitated the presence of the female body on stage, and relates the shift to the building of Japan as a modern nation-state. Analyzing the various debates for and against the replacement of *onnagata* by actresses, the chapter shows that the debates are structured by assumptions about the nature of woman and the nature of theater. It then outlines the modern formation of the definition of woman as a gender grounded in the body, and of the definition of theater as a type of desexualized performance, and shows how the process of forming categories of gender went hand in hand with theater reform.

Part II and Part III feature two pioneering actresses, Kawakami Sadayakko and Matsui Sumako, respectively. Carefully sifting through biographical representations *of* them as well as theatrical representations *by* them, these chapters analyze how these two women embody the tensions and complications of the modern formation of gender and performance.

Kawakami Sadayakko (1871–1946), discussed in Part II, lived a colorful life as geisha, actress, and mistress, performing in the United States and Europe around the turn of the century and becoming the first woman to perform in modern Japanese theater. Yet Sadayakko's acting is too often dismissed as amateurish and her life portrayed merely as a string of relationships with powerful men. Her career is often subsumed under the name of her husband, Kawakami Otojirō. This is true of the standard theater histories as well as the more recent accounts of her life from the perspective of "women's history." Chapter 3 examines the various biographers' attempts to fit Kawakami Sadayakko's life as geisha, actress, and mistress into the mold of the ideal wife and shows where these attempts break down. It is in the tension between the attempts at what might be called "wifeing" and aspects of her life that refuse to conform to this "wifeing" that the ideology of the "good wife, wise mother" becomes most visible.

Moving from the actress as woman to the actress as performer, chapter 4 delineates Kawakami Sadayakko's participation in a process that I call "straightening" theater. This concept is derived from the principles of "straight theater" (*seigeki*) advocated by the Kawakami troupe: a theater that focuses on dialogue and realistic action, shunning the stylized song and dance of the Japanese performance tradition. Straightening, however, went beyond simply removing elements of song and dance: Concomitant with its downplaying the citationality of speech and action was its rejection of the citationality of gender. Hence the rejection of the male performer of female roles in favor of using actresses such as Kawakami Sadayakko. Straightening theater was a multifaceted process producing what amounted to a "homosocial theater" of fighting men, exemplified by the play *Sino-Japanese War,* staged by the Kawakami troupe in 1904. Drawing on recent theorizing on citationality, homosociality, and direct and indirect speech and action, this chapter draws further theoretical connections between gender and performance

Finally, chapter 5 examines the performances by Kawakami Sadayakko, drawing on unpublished archival scripts. The most intriguing of these roles are "travel plays" and "colonial plays": the former include *The Geisha and the Knight,* staged by the actress and her troupe while touring the United States and in Europe, as well as *Around the World in Seventy Days* and *Dumb Travel,* which capitalized on these experiences of world travel. The latter, including versions of William Shakespeare's *Othello* set in Taiwan and of Wilhelm Meyer-Förster's *Alt Heidelberg* set in Korea, address Japan's emerging

colonial relationship to its Asian neighbors. None of these plays and adaptations have been studied in any detail either by Japanese scholars or by others. While several scholars have traced the reception of Sadayakko's performances in Europe and the United States, so far there has been very little analysis about the significance of this actress and her performances in the context of Japan's emergence as a nation-state and as a colonial empire. Moreover, an analysis of these plays shows that contrary to the attempts to straighten theater, it was the nonstraight elements of song, dance, and melodrama that attracted the audience to the theater.

Matsui Sumako (1886–1919), the focus of Part III, was the first professionally trained actress in modern Japan. Most of the conventional accounts of this actress focus on her torrid love affair with director Shimamura Hōgetsu, and her spectacular suicide after his death. Chapter 6 critiques these conventional representations, analyzing the underlying ideologies about gender and sexuality encapsulated in the labels of "New Woman." It sets the representations of her against her self-representation in her memoir.

Chapter 7 positions Matsui Sumako in the process to form "New Theater." New Theater involved new ideas and practices such as faithful adherence to the playwright's intentions, well-trained interpreters shunning commercial success and placing themselves at the service of the play, and spectators regarding the performance as a serious text to be read and appreciated without sexual involvement with the performers. These ideas, akin to what Jacques Derrida has called the "theater of logos," become clarified through debates between practitioners of New Theater, Tsubouchi Shōyō, Osanai Kaoru, and Shimamura Hōgetsu. This chapter analyzes these debates and relates Matsui Sumako's training as an actress to these emerging ideas of New Theater.

Chapter 8 discusses the theatrical roles performed by Matsui Sumako: feminist roles such as Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House* and Magda in Hermann Sudermann's *Heimat,* and femme fatale roles such as Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Sunken Bell.* While Matsui Sumako's enactment of *A Doll House* has drawn some critical attention because its timing coincided with the founding of Japan's first feminist literary magazine, the other plays have hitherto been studied only from the perspective of the reception of European drama in Japan. The controversies surrounding Matsui Sumako's career illuminate a larger argument: These roles embodied the modern definitions of womanhood and theater, while their performances also pushed the boundaries of these definitions.

Finally, since the competition between Matsui Sumako and Kawakami Sadayakko reveals the process of the modern formation of gender and performance most clearly, the epilogue examines the competing performances by the two actresses before concluding the book.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from non-English languages are mine. In accordance with East Asian practice, Japanese surnames precede given names (or pen names), excepting Japanese writers whose English-language works have been cited. The surnames are used in references, with the exceptions of some writers and artists whose stage names and pen names are used instead, in accordance with Japanese convention.

CHAPTER 2

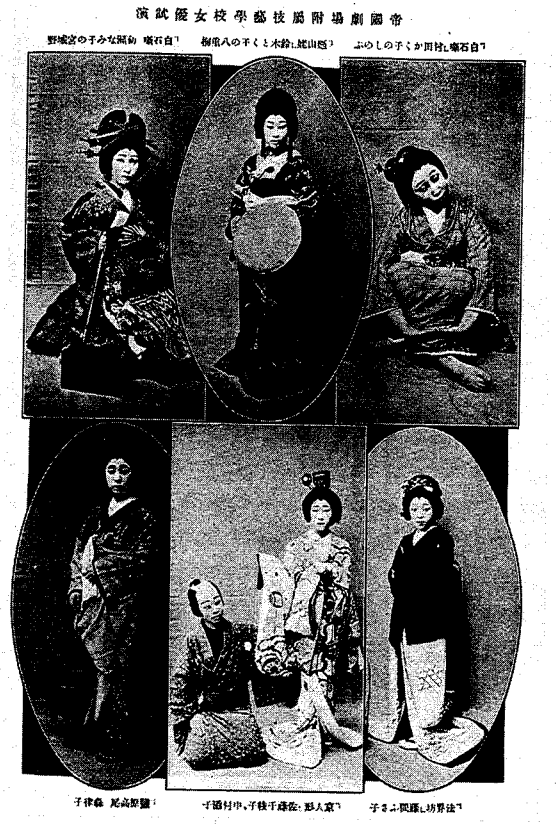
MODERN FORMATIONS OF GENDER AND PERFORMANCE

BETTER THAN MEN?: THE ACTRESS DEBATES

IN THE FINAL YEARS OF THE REIGN OF MEIJI EMPEROR (1868–1912), a new kind of woman appeared in the pages of *Engei gahō* (Theater graphic), a theater magazine featuring many photographs and sketches as well as performance reviews and essays. First published in 1907, the magazine had been including in almost every issue a page or two of photographs of the most popular geisha of the day. Dressed in Japanese kimono or Western dress, these women had shared the same space with male actors. But in the last years of the Meiji era, a new breed of women started appearing on these pages, arrayed in composite photographs, symbolically announcing that henceforth actresses, not geisha, were to be featured and contraposed with male actors. These photos thus announced the beginning of a new era, the era of the actress as modern woman and modern performer.

The rise of the actress to theatrical and social prominence, however, was not as easily accomplished as the replacement of one photo by another. In the two decades surrounding the turn of the century, roughly bordered by the beginning of Kawakami Sadayakko's career and the end of Matsui Sumako's life, the print media in Japan featured numerous articles debating various aspects of what was called "the actress question" (*joyū mondai*). Not only was "the actress question" a part of larger discussions about the status of women and the status of theater, but these discussions were a part of the process of building Japan as a modern nation-state. At stake was Japan's cultural legitimacy as a civilized nation that deserved equal treatment by the Western powers. A modern nation-state required modern subjects, gendered, educated, and integrated into the family as a unit of social organization.[1] Theater was one of the

2.1 Geisha from *Engei gahō* (September 1910)



2.2 Actresses of the Teikoku Gekijō training institute, *Engei gahō* (September 1910).

most visible spheres in which to assert cultural legitimacy, as well as one of the most effective tools for educating the modern subject for the modern nation-state. Hence the significance of debates about women and the theater at this juncture in Japanese history.

The debate over the "actress question" usually took the form of asking whether or not Japanese women were physically suited to be actresses and whether or not the newly trained actresses would be superior to the male impersonators of female roles, the *onnagata*. The debate focused on whether or not these "men acting like women" could, and should, be surpassed by "women acting like women." It is of course problematic to define *onnagata* as "men acting like women" since such a formulation assumes a binary opposition of gender that may not have been functioning in pre-Meiji Japan. It is arguable that *onnagata* as well as the *wakashu*—young men who served as sexual partners to adult men—constituted a separate gender in Tokugawa Japan.[2] For the most part, however, the debates of the 1890s to 1910s adopt the modern vocabulary of a binary opposition, according to which *onnagata* are described to be men acting like women, and actresses are described to be women acting like women.

One schema of the time categorized the various responses to the question "Do we need actresses?" into three groups: the pro-actress group, which says actresses are necessary (*joyū hitsuyō ron*); the anti-actress group, which says they are unnecessary (*joyū fuhitsuyō ron);* and the eclectic group, which says they are necessary for some kinds of plays but not for others in which *onnagata* are more appropriate (*danjo heichi ron*).[3] In all of the answers, for and against actresses, for and against *onnagata,* we can detect shared assumptions about the nature of woman and about the nature of theatrical performance.

It is not surprising that the most powerful arguments in favor of actresses came from those who welcomed the entrance of women into a realm of larger

social responsibilities. Those who argued that actresses are necessary, according to writer Minaguchi Biyō, simply declare that "it is a matter of course that a woman should play a woman [*onna ga onna ni naru*], that it is unnatural for a man to play a woman [*otoko ga onna ni naru*]."[4] This writer concludes that once this statement is made, there is nothing more to be added to the argument. However, for such a statement to make sense, there have to be certain shared assumptions already in place, not only about what it means to be a "woman" or a "man" but also about what it means to "play" and what it means to be "natural" or "unnatural." In other words, Minaguchi's statement belongs to an episteme in which "man" and "woman" stand for mutually exclusive identities from which the act of "playing" proceeds. A normalizing judgment considers this "playing" to be "natural" if it conforms to the various traits and behaviors deemed proper to that identity.

Nonetheless, in the statement it is deemed unnatural, but *not impossible,* for a man to play a woman. Moreover, the Japanese verb "*ni naru*" leaves the line between "play-acting" and "becoming" ambiguously permeable. Hence, it is possible to read the second half of the line as: "[I]t is unnatural [but not impossible, since such cases exist] for a man to become a woman." And with this reading, the tautology of the statement begins to unravel: The very stability of the boundary of "woman" versus "man," "becoming" versus "playing," begins to break down. Indeed, it was precisely because such men acting like women were socially visible that one needed to argue over whether or not women could act like women. In other words, "acting like a woman" was contested territory.

Those who favored introducing women onto the Japanese stage based their arguments on the premise that there is some kind of essence that is naturally expressed by a woman through her body. One of the strongest feminist advocates of actresses was Tamura Toshiko, a novelist who had dabbled in acting at one point in her life and whose writings portrayed powerful emotional bonds between women. She believed that *onnagata* only expressed limited aspects of women and that it was a foolish and "perverse art" (*hentai geijutsu*). She reflects on the great lengths to which the *onnagata* of the past would go in order to preserve the illusion of femininity even in their daily lives: claiming any illness to be due to "female trouble" (*chi no michi*), walking about in the Tokugawa equivalent of high-heeled shoes (*takai bokuri*), gingerly clinging to male attendants.[5] Tamura calls these efforts "utterly ridiculous" and not worth the trouble:

> No matter how much these ancient *onnagata* suffered for the sake of their art, it's not like they left us any special artistic techniques to portray women on stage. Just by wearing female wigs they were made into beautiful women, roughly imitated simple expressions of women's grief, anger, joy, and left us these as "patterns." That's all.[6]

In Tamura's opinion, if only women had been acting during all this time, there would have been more interesting, complex, and natural plays (*shizen na shibai*), instead of the set patterns (*kata*) handed down from generation to generation. This association of *onnagata* with stilted and stifling "patterns" and of actresses with authentic "nature" goes further: Tamura suggests that even the "crippled" plays (*katawa na shibai*) of the *kabuki* tradition left to us by *onnagata* can convey "a sense of truth" (*shin to iu kanji*) when performed by women. It may be good for actresses to study and perform these plays, precisely in order to break the "patterns" from the inside.

According to Tamura, while actresses may learn something from performing *kabuki,* it is in modern and "Western" plays that actresses achieve their greatest triumph: "[T]he role of an awakened woman [*jikaku shita onna*], or a woman with a modern education and a scientifically developed brain, would not be comprehensible to male actors raised in the Japanese *kabuki* theater."[7] Comparing the portrayal of two "New Women" characters in European plays, i.e., actress Matsui Sumako's portrayal of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll House* with *onnagata* Ichikawa Enjaku's portrayal of Anna in Gerhart Hauptmann's *Lonely People,* Tamura sees the former as having clearly triumphed over the latter. And here she focuses on the voice as the conduit of inner emotion to external form:

> The male actor who performed the role of Anna Mahr tried to portray an educated and complicated woman by using a low voice—in the end, he had to resort to his natural male voice, which sounded unnatural [*otoko no fushizen na jigoe*]. The role of Nora, too, would be difficult for an *onnagata* to perform . . . the part after she becomes self-aware could never be performed by a man. It is because a woman speaks at the top of her naturally thin voice [*hosoi onna no ji no koe*], and dares to let the sound of fury resonate, that the two words "self awareness" echo in the audience's hearts. It wouldn't work if a man were to use a feminine falsetto [*onna no tsukuri goe*].[8]

This feminist concludes that "A male impersonator of female roles might be able to portray a woman's weakness to a certain extent, but there is no way he could portray her strength."[9] In Tamura's view, then, a woman and her voice are naturally thin, but she can convey a woman's strength by raising her natural voice; a man, on the other hand can convey a woman's weakness by manipulating his voice, but as soon as he tries to convey a woman's strength, he reverts back to his natural masculinity.

The above view about the female voice is echoed by another woman writing in favor of actresses in modern plays: playwright and theater critic Hasegawa Shigure.[10] Hasegawa's argument is complex, advocating the use of actresses for modern plays, but the use of *onnagata* in *kabuki* plays: "Old

2.3 Male actors in a performance of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Lonely People*. *Onnagata* Ichikawa Enjaku as Anna Mahr is pictured on the top left and bottom right. *Engei gahō* (December 1911)

plays [*kyūgeki*], however, should be played by *onnagata* as they have been in the past. This may be just a matter of being caught in old traditions, but since [the art of *onnagata*] has developed to such an extent already, it would break the hard-wrought harmony to introduce actresses at this point."[11] While this view is closest to that of the "eclectic position" (*danjo heichi ron*) discussed later, Hasegawa also stresses that for "modern plays [*kindai geki*] that portray women living in the self-awareness of a new age, the actress is absolutely necessary."[12] Hasegawa points out that there are two instances in which *onnagata* simply cannot measure up to actresses: One is vocal, the other is visual. The first instance refers to plays that require singing: Unlike the chanting of the *kabuki* theater, where a stylized male voice has been accepted as portraying femininity, in Western-style songs the male voice cannot be disguised. The

other instance encompasses plays that require Western dress: Unlike the long-sleeved kimono, a dress would reveal the large hands and feet of *onnagata,* and, as Hasegawa puts it, "seeing that, one's enthusiasm fades."[13] The more body parts are exposed in a performance, then, the more advantage accrues to the actress.

These and related arguments in favor of introducing women to the stage reveal the assumption that there is some kind of essential femaleness that is naturally expressed by a woman through her body and her voice, and that the straightforward expression of such essence is the basis for a woman's liberation as well as the basis for her theatrical portrayal of such liberated women. A straight line is drawn from what is understood to be woman's essential nature, through what is described as a natural expression, to the performance on stage. Womanliness is the basis and starting point of this performance, rather than the result or end point of performance. The body is both the medium of this expression as well as the locus of woman's essential difference from man.

Now we turn to the adversaries of actresses. Those who argued that actresses are unnecessary usually based their judgment on physical criteria, especially the observation that women, specifically Japanese women, lacked the physiological and congenital qualities necessary to perform on stage. Japanese women were said to be too short, their voices too soft, their hips too large and unshapely.[14] Others added that Japanese women's noses are too flat, their faces not striking enough, and their gestures not forceful enough.[15]

The speciousness of the biological difference argument can be demonstrated by an argument, actually made during this time, that shifts the focus away from the body and onto the social context. The playwright Mayama Seika, for instance, takes up the issue of the shortness of Japanese women, seen by many critics as an unalterable and therefore incorrigible drawback for women aspiring to act on stage. Instead of focusing on the incorrigible body, however, Mayama looks at what surrounds it. He blames the architectural features of the Japanese stage, with its lateral beams, its great width, and its relatively low ceiling, which trick the audience into always measuring the performer's height against the stage dimensions, and thereby accentuate the shortness of the actress. The solution is to build a different kind of theater with a stage that is tall and not too wide and that is also small enough to benefit from women's softer voices.[16] Another solution is for actresses to learn to disguise their shortness. Just as *onnagata* have learned through long study and training how to disguise their tall physiques, actresses should be able to create the illusion of height, too.[17] But this kind of emphasis on architecture and artistic illusion over physical features was a minority viewpoint. Most anti-actress arguments concurred that "it seems a universal social rule that in general women are inferior to men in appearance."[18]

An even more serious blow against actresses, as described by the anti-actress faction, is that Japanese women's mental and psychological capacities are insufficient for the difficult task of acting. Kojima Koshū mentions the "simple brain operations" (*tanjun na nōryoku*) and "monotonous psychological functioning" (*henka ni toboshii shinteki sayō*) of women, which combine to make them inferior to men:

> An undistinguished role might be best performed by a woman who can seduce the audience with her feminine form [*katachi*] and appearance [*sugata*]. But for a role with a complicated personality, a role requiring portrayal of tormented suffering, or a role animated by intense passion, a woman with her simple brain operations and monotonous psychological functioning could never do justice. These roles would require the artistry of an *onnagata* who has the male's brainpower and psychological functions.[19]

In other words, a woman can look like a woman, but it takes a man to really *act* like a woman!

The most damning verdict against the mental capacities of Japanese women came from novelist Morita Sōhei.[20] Morita believes Japanese women to be lagging behind men "in all abilities" by about five or six centuries.

> For the time being at least, I doubt that any women, not only actresses, could measure up to men. In academics, for example, I do not even dream that women could be compared to men. I cannot help but believe thus, especially when I hear recent reports about grades at the women's universities and so on. Therefore, to make actresses appear together with male actors is like putting two kinds of people of utterly different status on stage together: there is no way it could result in a coherent art.[21]

According to this argument, not only do present-day performances prove that actresses are unable to measure up to *onnagata* in *kabuki* theater, with its long tradition and set patterns, but the fundamental inferiority of women to men would mean that actresses would also inevitably fail in any kind of new play that might be written in the future.

These assertions against the prospect of actresses point to several underlying assumptions: First, women are by nature inferior to men in physical as well as mental qualities; second, women's natural inferiority directly and naturally leads to their inferiority as performers, disqualifying them from the stage. Yet when these assumptions are compared to the assumptions underlying arguments in favor of actresses, certain similarities emerge. Both those arguing for actresses and those arguing against actresses align women with what they are "essentially," "physically" and "naturally."[22] This is set against the male *onnagata*'s "patterns," his "art," or "artifice." The difference is that the pro-actress faction values woman's natural expression, rooted in her body, over the *onnagata*'s artificial one, while the anti-actress faction values the *onnagata*'s superior art over woman's inferior nature, also rooted in her body.

This becomes even clearer in the arguments from the eclectic position. There are those who argue that actresses are good and necessary for some plays but not for others, that *onnagata* are more appropriate for *kabuki* plays. Minaguchi Biyō dismisses this position as pure nonsense: "If actresses are appropriate for the stage, *onnagata* should be abolished entirely; if *onnagata* are sufficient, why go through all the trouble to train actresses?"[23] But many others argue that it is indeed appropriate to use actresses for some plays but a shame to abolish *onnagata* entirely; that *onnagata* are sufficient and appropriate for *kabuki* plays, but that women should be trained for appearances in more modern plays. This had been the gist of Hasegawa Shigure's argument when she declared that *onnagata* were suitable for *kabuki* whereas modern plays called for actresses. Another advocate of eclecticism is novelist Yanagawa Shun'yō: He starts out by declaring boldly, "the question no longer is whether or not to train actresses in our country,"[24] but then goes on to explain why we should stick to *onnagata* for the "old plays" (*kyūgeki*). His view, shared by many others, is that the art of the *onnagata* in *kabuki* has had such a long history and has reached such a refined state that actresses would never be able to measure up, much less surpass it.

Most of the critics advocating eclecticism agree that *onnagata* and actresses should *not* appear on the same stage together. This practice was indeed seen in various theaters at the time, often because of the difficulty of training actresses: *Onnagata* were still needed to fill the minor female roles when not enough actresses were available. Objections by critics of this practice betray the assumption that the *onnagata* may be more skilled, but that the actress would offer a more natural presentation of female roles:

> No matter how good the actress and how skilled the *onnagata,* the two should not appear together on the same stage. They would only undermine each other's strong points, and would only displease the audience. No matter how skilled the *onnagata,* he could not bear comparison if placed side by side with a real woman. That a real woman would more closely resemble a real woman goes without saying.[25]

The *onnagata* might be more skilled, but the actress is more real. Women are to nature as *onnagata* are to art. Both feminist arguments in favor of actresses and misogynist arguments against actresses share this basic assumption.

This essentialist and expressive understanding of gender was a modern one, in contrast to the theatrical and performative understanding of gender exemplified in *kabuki.* Eventually the pro-actress faction overwhelmed the anti-actress

faction, yet the victory was an ambivalent one. It confirmed the definition of womanhood as an essence naturally grounded in a woman's body, a definition that would also justify the reduction of woman to *nothing but* her body.

WORSE THAN GEISHA?: SEX AND ACTING

There is another dimension of the actress debate that merits attention: the dimension of the sexual relationship between performers and audience members. For instance, one of the most intriguing arguments in favor of actresses comes from writer Kema Namboku. Admitting that his opinion is "daring" (*daitan*), he proposes that actresses are needed in today's theater because *onnagata* have lost the sexual appeal associated with their profession in the past: "After all," he points out, "in the old days, *onnagata* were male prostitutes [*iroko*]."[26] The context for such prostitution was the custom of male same-sex relations and the close relationship between actors and patrons in the *kabuki* theater. *Onnagata* wore special headgear to disguise their masculine shaved foreheads, as well as kimono with long sleeves like those worn by young women.[27] All this, says Kema, has changed in modern times. Today, *onnagata* have short haircuts and wear western clothes—silk hats and frock coats—in their daily lives, and even when they appear on stage, they seem to lack the long black hair and the soft breasts that the *onnagata* in the past seemed to have. Kema laments "Today's people are more skeptical than people in the past. No one today is as gullible as to think that anyone wearing a long-sleeved kimono is a woman."[28] If *onnagata* insist on cutting their hair short, he concludes, we need actresses to take their place.

This is indeed a "daring" argument. It opens a whole new can of worms, raising questions about the sexual status of impersonators in premodern times, about the status of the feminine characteristics that these impersonators *seemed* to have in the past but have lost in modern times, about the status of the sexual attractiveness of *onnagata* acting like women, which can be replaced by the sexual attractiveness of actresses acting like women.

What is striking, though, is that this can of worms is put away in a closet, as it were, almost as soon as it is opened. Kema's argument is remarkable because it is precisely around this time that the questions he raises are becoming unmentionable, if not unthinkable.[29] An article appearing in the same magazine in the same year, 1912, illustrates this point. In this article, the argument about the sexual attractiveness of actresses is turned around into an argument against allowing women on stage: The writer Nakayama Hakuhō claims that men and women sharing the stage would lead to lewdness either among the performers or among the audience. Nakayama worries about the impact of actresses on morality and decency:

> If an actor and an actress were to take each other's hands on stage, and sit close enough that their knees touch, would not the real sensations of the performers themselves be excited, even before those of the audience? You cannot have a theater with actresses only, but if men and women were to act together, we would not be able to watch it with comfortable interest.[30]

The significant term here is "real sensations" (*jikkan*), the sensations of actual physical arousal that love scenes presented by real men and women on stage would provoke. Another significant phrase is "comfortable interest" (*anshin shita kyōmi*), which implies a state directly opposed to "real sensations." It is a state of interested yet detached appreciation of the scene portrayed, and this is presented as the proper relationship of performer to audience. Nakayama denies the possibility of an all-female theater, which was soon to be actualized in the form of the all-female Takarazuka theater, but leaves the status of the all-male *kabuki* theater unquestioned.[31] Unquestioned also is the status of love scenes in *kabuki* performed by men. In light of Kema Nanboku's opinion, discussed earlier, we might well ask: Are real sensations aroused when *men* act together on stage? Nakayama does not even raise the question, much less answer it, and thus the question of sexuality in premodern theater is put safely away into the closet.

What is revealed in these arguments for and against actresses? One is the shared assumption that overt sexuality may have been part of the attraction of the premodern theater but that modern theater is, or should be, different. The world of *onnagata* as one of male prostitution is seen as the world of old theater, set against the modern theater. And while the old theater is associated with male same-sex relations, the modern theater is associated with the threat, or promise, of heterosexual arousal. Most importantly, while the sexuality of the old theater becomes unmentionable and is eventually disavowed, the sexuality of the new theater becomes an object of constant surveillance and constant incitement.

This is where the "worse than geisha" argument is heard: Actresses are compared to geisha as well as prostitutes and are judged by the degree to which they can differentiate themselves from those women engaged in sex work.[32] Thus Kuwano Tōka, author of a book-length treatise on the actress question, devotes a whole chapter on the question "Are actresses any different from geisha?"[33] He lists the various similarities between actresses and geisha: their lack of education, their loose sexual morals, their dependence on male patrons, their vanity, and their desire to ensnare rich men. In some ways, says Kuwano, actresses are even worse than geisha and are nothing but "high class prostitutes" (*kōtō inbai*) who sell themselves to their patrons.[34] Kuwano concludes:

> Once upon a time, geisha robbed clients away from prostitutes [*baishunfu*] by stooping to their level. Now, retribution is upon them, as geisha lose their

> clients to actresses. The reason that geisha dominated prostitutes in the beginning was that geisha kept up the appearance of not being prostitutes. This appealed to the tastes of hypocritical men of the time. But now, geisha have lost their superficial purity which was their only weapon, and have become no different from prostitutes in name or in fact. Thus their dominance is gradually weakening, and they are being surpassed by actresses, whose superficial purity can still deceive society for a while.[35]

Are actresses better than geisha or worse than prostitutes? Answers vary. What is clear from these documents is that an actress is valued in so far as she can distance herself from sex work, but that she is constantly suspected of being no different from those women who sell sexual performances.

It is significant that this entire debate on actresses is taking place against the background of nation-building. This becomes clear in the arguments of several critics. If, as these critics insist, it goes without saying that a real woman would be better to perform women's roles, why should there be any need for *onnagata?* This is indeed Minaguchi's viewpoint, and he reluctantly admits that the *onnagata* has a bleak future: Considered "from the perspective of the national theater [*kokugeki*] of Japan in the future,"[36] something as unnatural as men acting as women would not be allowed. Minaguchi insists that he is not pro-actress at heart, that personally he believes men to be superior to women in the artistic realm, and that the *onnagata*'s art is unique to Japan and should be shown abroad as well. Minaguchi's tone betrays his aversion to the theater of the future in which it is assumed that men should play men and women play women. He is resigned to lay aside his personal preferences, however, for the sake of the good of the national future. *Onnagata* could survive, he muses, as an antique art (*ko bijutsu*), protected and preserved like the *noh* theater.[37]

A similar tone of reluctant concession pervades writer Kojima Koshū's argument for partial use of actresses. While admitting that actresses should be used in modern plays (*kindai geki*), where female protagonists are often more central, where dialogues are crucial, and where it may be advantageous to have female voices expressing the nuances of female psychology,[38] he casts doubt on the status of such kinds of plays in Japanese society:

> How many people in Tokyo at this moment have any wish to see modern plays? Probably about ten thousand. In a place like Osaka, probably less than one thousand. Thus, modern plays are part of a limited problem concerning only those few who want to see progressive [*shimpo shita*] plays like those performed in the West [*taisei*], or those few who are making great efforts to perform these plays in Japan.[39]

Although Kojima uses the language of the enlightened intellectual impatiently waiting for the nation to come to its senses—"How long will Japanese theater maintain its status quo? When will the majority of Japanese spectators open their eyes and start singing the praises of the so-called modern play?"[40]—his tone suggests that his sympathies may lie elsewhere. Kojima concludes that while actresses may be necessary for modern plays centering on dialogue, for the present and near future, *onnagata* will be more valued than the actress.

All the opinions surveyed so far have one trait in common: They assume that men and women are fundamentally different and that difference is fixed at the level of the body by nature. This assumption underlies both the argument that women should perform women's roles because for a man to do so would be unnatural, and the argument that women should *not* perform because they are naturally and physically inferior to men. And while the argument in favor of actresses privileges the naturally female body over the artifice of performances by *onnagata,* and the argument in favor of *onnagata* reverses this hierarchy by privileging the skill of the *onnagata* over the physical characteristics of the female body, the fundamental premise remains the same: The *onnagata* is aligned with art and performance, the actress with nature and the body.

The assumptions structuring the actress debates reveal a specifically modern definition of theater—as the performance and reception of dramas that express inner meanings through transparent signifiers—and a modern definition of woman—as a stable category based on the alignment of biological sexual difference, social gendering, and heterosexual coupling. Although the categories of modern theater and modern woman are inherently unstable and mutually imbricated, the effort to separate them and stabilize them has called for repeated acts of coercion, exclusion, and violence, and therein lies the significance of uncovering the historicity of these categories.

THE MODERN FORMATION OF WOMAN: FROM PERFORMANCE TO BODY

The formation of modern categories of gender and performance should be seen as a contentious process that took place in the decades following 1868, decades shaped by the effort to build a nation-state that would not only resist being colonized by the West but would itself become a colonizer of other nations. On the one hand, gender was produced and regulated as a fixed category through medical discourse about biological sexual difference, as well as legal and political codes such as those forbidding crossdressing and those excluding women from participation in politics. This went hand in hand with the institution of the norm of heterosexuality, a norm that both assumed and constituted the binary division between men and women. Such a norm was consolidated through the pathologizing of homosexuality as "perverse" and "unnatural," supported by

the translation of European writings on sexology and the influx of Christian religious influence.

It can be argued that before the Meiji period, what we now think of as biological sex and cultural gender were aligned radically differently from today.[41] For instance, in an eighteenth-century treatise on proper behavior for women, *Onna daigaku,* biological motherhood counts for little in the definition of ideal femininity. If a wife is unable to have children, for example, she can adopt the child of her husband's mistress. Biological motherhood is not crucial to a woman, since its absence does not necessarily threaten the status of the wife, and its presence does not necessarily elevate the status of the mistress. Further, the absence of physical capability for biological motherhood does not prevent anyone, including a man, from being able to represent ideal femininity. If anything, the capacity for biological motherhood is associated with lack of femininity: Female sex does not guarantee feminine gender, and might indeed be antithetical to it. This is why some scholars conclude that during this period, "Sex was perceived as subordinate to gender."[42] This is in stark contrast to the modern definition of woman, shaped in the period under investigation here, in which *gender is perceived as subordinate to sex,* the former derived from the latter and grounded on it. Before the modern period, feminine gender was thought to be achieved by subordinating the female sex, by training and cultivating the body to match the ideal of femininity. And that ideal of femininity could be represented by a man acting like a woman, the *onnagata* of the *kabuki* theater.

By contrast, medical and scientific discourse during the Meiji period emphasized the physical basis for the difference between men and women. In 1875 (Meiji 8), the first translation of a European scientific text on sexual difference was published, and the next two decades saw the publication of over a hundred texts on sexology, including translations, adaptations, academic treatises, and popular guidebooks.[43] Many of these books would start with a description of male and female sexual organs, move on to discuss sexual desire, and the mechanism of conception and childbirth, and would often include an injunction against masturbation.[44] After surveying various sexological writings from the 1870s to the 1890s, feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko summarizes how the diverse kinds of Meiji discourse on men and women became homogenized by the 1890s:

> Among the theories of gender of this period, what eventually won out was the "theory of different rights for men and women" [*danjo iken*], or at best the theory of "equal status with a difference" [*sai aru byōdō*].[45] This argument, which legitimizes the sexual division of labor inside and outside the home under the guise of scientific principles, was not to be questioned for another century.[46]

Thus, what became hegemonic was the idea that the gendered division of labor is grounded in scientifically observable sexual difference.

The question of whether or not there "really exists" biological sexual difference between men and women has always been embroiled in gender ideology. Biological research is not free from cultural bias, and the language of biology reproduces cultural assumptions about gender. For this reason, feminist scientists have claimed that the question of purely biological, noncultural sexual difference is unanswerable.[47] For the purpose of my argument here it suffices to say that it was at this point in history that the *discourse of biological sexual difference* between men and women became predominant in Japan, and this served to create the category of "woman." Biological sexual difference became aligned with other kinds of difference, but then it was seen as the natural basis for treating women as a category of bodies that are different from and inferior to male bodies.

Along with medical and scientific discourse about biological sexual difference, legal, educational, and political discourse all contributed to a gendering of the social sphere. Historians have pointed out that in the Edo period preceding 1868, it was social class, rather than gender, that most strongly defined a person's status in society.[48] The new government after 1868 ostensibly "leveled" the class hierarchy, unifying the general populace into one class of "common people" (*heimin*). At the same time, the government started issuing various laws and pronouncements that addressed women in all classes, differentiating them from men.[49] This is of course not to suggest that class hierarchies ceased to exist and to powerfully shape people's experiences; nonetheless, it is significant that in the Meiji period, legal, political, educational, and other discourses installed a category of woman that would cut across class differentiations.

For example, the strict dress codes that prevailed in Edo society, detailing clothing and hairstyles allowed for each class, were no longer applicable. The government encouraged Western dress and short haircuts for all men for the sake of progress and civilization. When some women decided to cut their hair, however, the government responded swiftly, outlawing short hair for women in 1872. This double movement shows that the government was promoting the construction of a certain kind of a modern national subject, but that this subject was assumed to be male. All men might henceforth be equal in theory, but women were a different story. The same law of 1872 made it illegal for men to dress like women and for women to dress like men, thus drawing a stricter line between the genders.[50]

To say that the government promoted the construction of a modern national subject that was assumed to be male is not to say that women were ignored by the government, but that its policies became explicitly gendered in the 1880s and 1890s.[51] Another powerful way to construct "women" as a category was the educational system. Four years of elementary education were

made mandatory for all children in 1872, but in a move structurally parallel to the banning of short hair for women, in 1879, the education ministry decided to institutionalize women's education as separate from men's education beyond the elementary level. In 1899, each prefecture was ordered to establish at least one higher school for girls, and these schools adopted a curriculum stressing the domestic arts. The educational policy was to produce the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*), identifying the role of women as helpmates and reproducers of the loyal male subjects of the nation-state.[52]

The ideology of women as "good wives, wise mothers" was now used to justify the explicit exclusion of all women from politics. Whereas previously there had been various venues for women to participate in local politics, depending on their different positions in society, now, women were prohibited from participating directly in the political process yet were expected to contribute to the nation indirectly by serving the men in their lives. Starting in 1890, women were barred from political meetings and from forming political organizations.[53] These legal, educational, and political discourses produced and controlled a category of "woman" that cut across all classes and that was set in opposition to "man."

The third aspect of the formation of the category of woman can be located in the realm of sexuality. Scholars such as Furukawa Makoto and Gregory Pflugfelder have pointed out that up until the 1900s, male-male sexual relations in Japan were regarded under an interpretive code of "male love" (*nanshoku*), which is quite different from the code of homosexuality in Westernized modernity. "Male love" was not condemned as unnatural or immoral; it was on equal terms with "female love," and there were sustained debates about the merits of each. Male-male sexual behavior was something that a man might engage in for various reasons at various moments in his life: It coexisted with heterosexual behavior.[54]

In the Meiji period, the introduction of Western medicine, sexology, and Christian dogma brought with it the idea that homosexuality is unnatural and pathological. By the end of Meiji, male homosexuality was interpreted through the code of "perverse sexual desire," and this marginalizing and pathologizing of male homosexuality went hand in hand with a new emphasis on heterosexuality. Monogamous marriage between husband and wife became the new ideal and the proper conduit for sexuality, promoted through the popular sexology texts mentioned earlier. This new norm of heterosexuality both assumed and constituted the binary division of gender. In other words, by positing heterosexuality as the norm, the division between male and female became absolute, and by positing the natural division and complementarity between male and female, heterosexuality became normalized. Thus it became "self-evident" that a woman is a woman, that one cannot act like a woman unless one is a woman, and that even if one does act like a woman, one cannot really be a woman unless one really is a woman.

In this way, the performative dimension was purged from the definition of gender. Of course, as the very existence of debates concerning "acting like a woman" indicates, and as the more recent theatrical as well as theoretical renaissance of interest in "gender as performance" illustrates, this dimension could never be purged completely. Let us then look a little further into the relationship between theater and gender definitions.

One of the more visible signs of the changing definition of "woman" in the modern period is the change in the basis for what is considered ideal feminine beauty. This change corresponds to a shift in the site of definition of femininity from performance to the body. In the Edo period, the ideal of womanhood was represented by performance: the *onnagata* in *kabuki* theater who specializes in women's roles.[55] Various scholars have pointed out that the pictorial representation of the late Edo period hardly distinguishes between the beauty of women and the beauty of young boy actors. In woodblock prints they are depicted with the same kinds of facial features and with the same kinds of hairstyles and clothes, the contours of their bodies concealed beneath layers of kimono. Often it is only the title of the print that distinguishes women from *onnagata*. The feminine beauty of the *onnagata* had little to do with the anatomical body of the actor; it had everything to do with the way he dressed, moved, gestured, and danced—in short, with the way he performed.[56] And women, especially those in the pleasure quarters, imitated the *onnagata*'s performance as the ideal of feminine beauty, copying his kimono patterns, his hairstyle, his carefully contrived gestures.

In the decades following 1868, changes in clothing from kimono to Western-style dress helped shift the focus of feminine beauty from performance to the physical body. Western dress not only revealed the contours of the wearer, but it exposed hitherto hidden body parts such as the arms and the legs as well. In general, it seemed to draw attention to the body beneath the surface. In the 1910s, the popularization of cinema also contributed to the shift of focus: Cinematic close-ups of *onnagata* drew attention to body parts hitherto concealed through movement and distance, such as the prominent Adam's apple and the bony hands.[57] The visibility of the *onnagata*'s body contributed to the *onnagata*'s downfall: No longer disguised through clothing, movement, and distance, he lost the ability to achieve the ideal of feminine beauty and was replaced by the actress, whose body now became the privileged sign of womanhood. The 1629 ban on women acting on stage was rescinded in 1891, and actresses gradually began to gain prominence.

It ought to be noted that women had continued to perform even after the ban of 1629. There were women who were hired to perform plays and to teach song and dance to the ladies in the mansions of feudal lords (*okyōgenshi*), and there were even small troupes of female *kabuki* players (*onna yakusha*) at the margins of the theater world in the Tokugawa period.[58] After

the Meiji Restoration, some of the former *okyōgenshi* who lost their feudal patronage turned to acting on the public stage. The most celebrated was Ichikawa Kumehachi, who apprenticed with the famous *kabuki* actor Ichikawa Danjūrō IX, learned most of his repertoire, which consisted of heroic male roles, and became known as "lady Danjūrō." In a later twist that illustrates the endless circle of citation of performed femininity, Kumehachi's performances became the model for the impersonation of female roles by male actors in *shimpa:* Famous *shimpa onnagata* such as Kitamura Rokurō idolized her and copied her speech patterns.[59]

Geisha comprised another group of performing women who persisted after the ban of 1629. And geisha, because of their training in music and dance, found themselves interpellated to the public stage as the demand for actresses became increasingly louder. In November of 1891 (Meiji 24), a mere three months after the rescinding of the ban against women's performance, the Seibikan troupe led by Ii Yōhō staged the first "male and female co-production reform theater" (*danjo gōdō kairyō engeki*). Six women, all former geisha, participated in this 15-day run. Yoda Gakkai, a theater reformer who advocated abolishing *onnagata,* was the advisor to the troupe and wrote the *kabuki*-style play that they performed. Chitose Beiha, one of the geisha, continued to appear in a few other performances, but the Seibikan theater quickly folded due to internal squabbling. None of the women performers were heard from much thereafter.

The figures of Ichikawa Kumehachi, Chitose Beiha, and other women like them represent an important subplot in the story about the rise of actresses in modern Japan. Significantly, women like Ichikawa Kumehachi and Chitose Beiha were usually called "female players" (*onna yakusha*) or "female actors" (*onna haiyū*), but hardly ever "actresses" (*joyū*).[60] This difference is not trivial: *Onna yakusha* and *onna haiyū* imply that the standard actor (*yakusha, haiyū*) is male and that the female (*onna*) variant is an aberration or an imitation. That terms such as "*otoko yakusha*" or "*otoko haiyū*" are never used for male (*otoko*) actors further supports this asymmetry. *Joyū,* on the other hand, is symmetrical, at least lexically, with *danyū,* the male counterpart.

Thus it is Kawakami Sadayakko, or alternatively Matsui Sumako, rather than any "female players" or "female actors" before them, who are considered by most theater historians to have been the first generation of actresses. This suggests that the definition of actress involves more than a woman performing.[61] The rise of the actress involves not only a shift in performers' sex from male to female, but also a shift in performance convention itself, as well as a shift in the characteristics of the performed feminine gender. It is because they acted in new kinds of plays, different from *kabuki* plays, and because they represented new kinds of women in these plays that Kawakami Sadayakko and Matsui Sumako are considered the first generation actresses.

THE MODERN FORMATION OF THEATER: FROM SHIBAI TO ENGEKI

In the years between the 1860s and the 1910s, there occurred a shift in the realm of theater as well, a shift that interacted with the formation of "woman" and prepared the way for the emergence of actresses. This shift can be roughly labeled as the shift from "*shibai*"[62] to "*engeki,*"[63] or from the theater before modernity to the theater of modernity.[64] "*Shibai*" literally translates as " being on the lawn," referring to the fact that premodern performances often took place on lawns adjacent to temples and shrines. In defining "*shibai,*" some scholars have pointed to the coalescence of locale, theater building, and performance, as well as to a mode of experiencing theater that involves multiple senses, such as drinking, eating, smoking, conversing with neighbors, hanging out with actors, and occasionally paying attention to the proceedings on stage.[65] "*Engeki,*" in contrast, literally means "extending drama," and carries with it connotations emphasizing the literary aspects of the play and the mimetic aspects of acting it out. The shift from "*shibai*" to "*engeki,*" then, is a process of localizing and narrowing in temporal and physical scope, of shifting from theater as a participatory experience that involves multiple senses to theater as a text to be read aloud on stage and heard in silence by audience. The chapters that follow will trace some of the most salient aspects of the formation of theater in Japanese modernity, delineating the process of "straightening" and the crystallizing of the later ideology of the "New Theater."

In order to analyze the shift to the modern definitions of theater, however, the definition of "early modern" theater needs to be clarified and refined first. Charting the shift from medieval to early modern theater will allow us to go further in charting the shift from early modern to modern theater. For instance, theater historian Moriya Takeshi discusses the formation of two characteristic elements of the performing arts of the early modern period, covering the two and a half centuries from 1603 to the 1868: the "show business" (*kōgyō*) system and the "school master" (*iemoto*) system.[66] These two systems are analyzed as interlocking systems that share the same material base and provide evidence of the formation of a mass society in early modern Japan.

The "show business" (*kōgyō*) system is defined as "a system in which performers without specified patrons perform their arts in a specified place with the aim of profit, and in which an unspecified audience may attend the performances by paying money."[67] In other words, the system includes the existence of a group of *performers* not bound to specific patrons, as in the medieval period, but earning profit through their performances; a population of *theatergoers* with the money and leisure necessary to pay for performances as entertainment rather than being invited or obligated to attend them as part of political or religious rites; and a specific and at least semipermanent *facility*

set aside for performances rather than the makeshift stages of the medieval period. Moriya likens the "show business" system to a store in which performances can be bought as if they were commodities. The semipermanent space specifically set aside for performances was called "*shibai,*" and Moriya notes that a publication in 1825 lists 132 such facilities, distributed widely in the major towns of the archipelago.

The "*iemoto*" system, on the other hand, is defined as "a system in which a certain number of teachers are employed to educate students in the arts, following a unified curriculum, awarding licenses with fees according to the level of the progress of the students, and in which the students feel these licenses to be valuable."[68] This system involves the existence of performers who no longer aim to advance their own artistry but primarily function as *teachers;* a population of *students* with the time and money to choose to become students in these arts; and a *space* within the homes of townspeople where the arts can be practiced and displayed. In other words, this system is most similar to that of a school, in which performance art is treated like a skill that can be studied by anyone. The room set aside in the homes of townspeople was called "*zashiki*" (tatami-lined room), and Moriya points out that the formation of the *iemoto* system depended on the "material apparatus"(*busshitsu teki na sōchi*) that made possible the installation of tatami-lined rooms, specifically the change from wooden roofs to shingled roofs that keep out rain.[69]

It is the public half of the interlocking system that interests us in particular: the "show business" system of public production of the performing arts (*gekijō geinō*), which is also often metonymically called "*shibai,*" according to the performance facility that characterizes it. The *iemoto* system, on the other hand, is a realm of private learning and enjoyment of the arts (*shitsunai geinō*), and while not unimportant for the formation of the modern theater, its function is more mediated and indirect. To summarize, the three most salient aspects of *shibai* were the ambivalent status of the actor at the margins of social order, the location of the performance in a theater building within a special district set aside for the theater, and the implication of multisensory pleasure in the theatergoing experience. Chapter 4 and chapter 7 will deal with how these aspects would shift in modern theater. The status of actors would change to that of a professional with special skills, the performance would become a spatially and temporally bounded event, cut off from the milieu of the pleasure quarters, and the theatergoing experience would change to that of a silent communion with the interior meaning of a play.

This, then, was the situation of the theater in 1868, when the event known as the Meiji Restoration created the conditions of possibility for the formation of the "modern" theater. Theatrical performance in post - 1868 Japan was targeted by repeated attempts—initiated by government officials, business leaders, intellectuals, and theater practitioners themselves—to purge it of sex, prostitution, and other unsavory elements that would detract from its purpose as cultural showcase and pedagogical institution for the modern nation-state.[70] The modern theater was to be an exalted theater based on inner essences, expressed and perceived through the transparent significations of the actors' voices and bodies. Such transparency was to be guaranteed by reforms in acting techniques and the language of dramas, and transparency also required the replacement of *onnagata* by actresses, because acting like a woman was now only possible for a "real woman." The stability of the categories of gender and performance could only be maintained by repeated sanctions, enforcing particular definitions of womanhood or theater and excluding all deviating definitions. And yet the very fact that such repeated acts of coercion and exclusion were needed perhaps points to the inherent instability of the categories and divisions and perhaps suggests the fundamental imbrication of gender and performance.