



## Manifestations of the Kabuki actors' gender in woodblock prints of the Edo Period

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### ABSTRACT

The connection between Kabuki theatre and Japanese woodblock prints of the Edo period (1603–1868), especially in their portraits of actors called *yakusha-e*, offers an exceptional opportunity to analyse perceptions of the sex of the actor: as the hero of the drama, as well as the character performed on the stage. Both phenomena flourished in the Edo period and had a crucial impact on the visual art of the time, inspiring pictures of the Floating World (Jap. *Ukiyo-e*). The images on *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints serve as a pretext for approaching the matter of whether to portray an actor as a performer (a man) or as the character performed by him (which could also be a woman, as in the case of the *onnagata* actor). The author focuses on the actors' identification with their own sex (only men appeared on the Kabuki stage) and on cases of breaking the convention between the real actor and his stage *emploi*. In the first part, the paper discusses the historical background of Kabuki theatre, which was invented by a woman (Izumo-no Okuni) and then after a few government edicts, was allowed to be performed on the stage only by adult men. Since the Kabuki tradition has successfully continued until today, apart from surveys of theatrical archives, the author supports her arguments by also referring to contemporary phenomena, especially the Kabuki performances she has watched in Japan (in such theatres as: Kabuki-za, Minami-za, the National Theatre in Tokyo, and Zenshin-za), and through interviews with actors and people of the theatre. In parallel, *Ukiyo-e* images of the Edo period are studied, with core research from the National Museum in Kraków, Poland, and its collection of Japanese woodblock prints (including over 4600 original works from the Edo Period), and with special attention paid to the *yakusha-e* portrait by Utagawa Kuniyoshi.

### KEYWORDS

Japanese art; Japanese aesthetics; Kabuki theatre; gender; the Edo period

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In the early seventeenth century, after hundreds of years of civil war between the eminent clans, Tokugawa Iyasu (1543–1616) unified Japan and for nearly 300 years, the shogunate controlled the whole country. The isolation of Japan in the comparatively peaceful time of the Edo Period (1603–1868) saw such changes as the transfer of the capital of the new military government from Kyoto to Edo (nowadays Tokyo), and facilitated the introduction of new economic structures and a new social hierarchy.

For the purpose of our discussion, we should mention the decline of traditional values and the samurai class, which led to the emergence of a new strong economic class: the *chōnin*, or the townspeople. The frailty of human fate they had experienced during the long wars influenced a new hedonistic approach to life. It also led to them taking pleasure in simple entertainment that fulfilled the expectations of the townspeople, who in previous eras had stood at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Their increasing economic position enabled them to dictate tastes in entertainment, and to sculpt the overall form of culture in the Edo period. Thus, new cultural values emerged and two extremely important cultural phenomena were born: the Kabuki theatre and the *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints.

The idea of ‘seizing the moment’ is reflected in the literature of the period and was insightfully described by Asai Ryoji (1612–1691) in his *Tales of the Floating World* (*Ukiyo Monogatari*) published in 1661:

Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossom and the maple leaves, singing songs and drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call *Ukiyo-e* (Romanowicz, 2011: 24; cited after Lane, 1978: 11).

The connection between the Kabuki theatre and Japanese woodblock prints in the Edo period, and especially portraits of the actors called *yakusha-e*, provides an exceptional opportunity to analyse the popular perceptions of the gender of the actor as the hero of the drama, as well as the of character played on the stage. Both the theatre and woodblock printing techniques flourished in the Edo period, and had a crucial impact on the visual arts of the time, as well as inspiring pictures of the Floating World (*Ukiyo-e*).

The images on *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints can therefore serve as a starting point for approaching the matter of whether an actor was principally portrayed as a performer (a man); or as the character performed by him (which could also be a woman, as in the case of the *onnagata* actor). I would like to emphasize the consciousness of the actor’s own gender in these images (as only men performed on the Kabuki stage), and also pay special attention to the character of the drama and the breaking of conventions between the real actor and his stage *emploi*.

After examining the above issues, one may conclude that, although Japanese culture recognises two genders, it is clearly aware of the diversity of gender problems which can be implied whenever an actor performs in accordance with his or her gender identity. Woodblock prints, very strongly connected with the Kabuki world, can serve as visual evidence of the social affairs that mattered in that particular time period.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest actor portraits should be examined in the context of their portrayal of the characters in the drama, *i.e.* the fictional characters whose stories were shown on stage. An excellent example is the print by Torii Kiyomasu II, presenting the actors Sanjo Kantaro and Ichimura Takenojo as young lovers in the play *Yaoya O-Shichi* [Photo No. 1; MNK VI-4206]. Although both actors are known by their names, the scene depicts an encounter in a realistic street and does not feature the Kabuki stage.

Another category of images consist of the classic *yakusha-e* — prints created as portraits of famous actors. This type of subject emerged alongside the development of 'portraits of beautiful people', or *bijin-ga*, a term which at first primarily included the famous beauties of the time: actors and courtesans, where only female beauties were included.

What should be emphasised is that the *kabuki* (bizarre) style of acting was created in 1601 by a woman, a shrine priestess called Izumo-no Okuni (1571?–1613). However, in 1629, women were banned from performing on stage, due to the inappropriate behaviour of some groups of women after the performances. Their roles were taken on by young boys, who in 1652 were replaced — for the same reasons — by grown men. Pursuant to a special order, the men who portrayed female characters (*onnagata*) had to shave their hair from over their foreheads. Onstage, the bald spot was covered by a violet *yaroboshi* cap.

These actors became role models, eventually reaching the level of popularity attained by modern celebrities. Therefore, it is no surprise that the demand for portraits was enormous, both for those actors playing the male roles (*tachi-yaku*) and those who played the female parts (*onnagata*). The images showed the audience's favourite moments from specific roles that they had portrayed in the course of their careers. The particular moment captured on the woodblock prints was the moment of stillness, emphasising the climax of a scene. This pose featured a special bending of the body and circular movements by the actor, and was called the *mie*. This kind of portrait was created in the Katsukawa school, and was mastered by Shunshō, who became the author of many perfectly captured poses and compositions [Photo No. 2; MNK VI-794].

<sup>1</sup> *Ukiyo-e* images of the Edo period were studied, with the core research being performed at the National Museum in Kraków with its collection of Japanese woodblock prints (including over 4600 original works from the Edo Period). All images of woodblock prints presented in this paper are the property of the National Museum in Kraków, Poland.

The images of actors were captioned with the names they had been given by the guilds of actors. Apart from their name and surname they were also identified by their emblem, or clan crest, which was a particular source of pride. One of the most popular clans was the Ichikawa clan, which still exists today.<sup>2</sup> A characteristic sign of the clan was its *mon* (clan crest), consisting of three squares, which can be seen on many of the costumes [Photo No. 2; MNK VI-794]. Kabuki enthusiasts and fans of the actors were fluent in the language of the attributes characteristic of the plays. For example, a fragment of a bell and an *eboshi* cap hanging on a branch were a simple way of identifying the story of *Dōjōji*.<sup>3</sup> This tragedy tells of a woman in love who took revenge on the lover that had jilted her, who hid under a bell. She then changed into a serpent and coiled her hot body around the bell, melting it along with the man who had betrayed her [Photo No. 3; MNK VI-4101]. The dancing actor portrayed in the image No. 3 is Nakamura Noshiō in the role of the jilted lover.

The key to examining the gender of the portrayed actor lies in remembering the viewer's awareness of the fact that all roles were played by men. Belonging to a clan of actors meant the actor had completed years of hard work, and required their acceptance by the master of the clan. Actors often changed their names during their acting careers, and the name changing was also an opportunity to have a commemorative image made: a special woodblock print, emphasising the importance of the occasion. In the collection of the National Museum in Kraków you can find woodblock prints by the great artist Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825). One of these is a portrait of an *onnagata* actor playing the role of a woman dressed as a man, which shows many themes [Photo No. 4; MNK VI-4104]. The extremely popular play *Shibaraku*, telling the story of a stolen sword, was adapted (in a slightly modified version) in a play entitled *Onna Shibaraku* (Female Shibaraku). The multilayered narrative and the construction of the play itself are not the only images suggesting change and transformation that we see in the woodblock print.

The clearly marked attributes include: a woman's kimono covered by a man's outdoor robe with a visibly exposed *mon* crest; a woman's hairstyle covered by a man's hat; and finally the main narrative trope — the sword sticking up. All of these serve to identify the heroine of the play. An observant viewer will also notice the attribute of the *onnagata*: a fragment of the *yaroboshi* cap, visible just above the actor's forehead. On the board of the woodblock print there are words that also clarify the interpretation of the image: *Ronosuke aratame yon dai me Segawa Roko* (Ronosuke is transformed into Segawa Roko IV).

<sup>2</sup> Ichikawa Danjūrō XII, currently the last in the line of succession of that clan, died in 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The *Dōjōji* exists in many versions; the image shows a scene from the play *Hanagatami Kazeori Eboshi*.

One of the eminent theorists of the Kabuki theatre, Yoshizawa Ayame (1673–1729), famously said that when an actor is driven by his ambition to play a woman as gracefully as possible, he becomes a man once more (Romanowicz, 1994: 26).

Another print, by Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815), gives a great example of the interplay between an actor's portrait and a scene in a Kabuki drama. It shows two characters from a play — a woman and a man — who are clearly marked by gender indicators. At the same time, the theatre space is also shown. It is signalled by the characteristic manifestations of the *onnagata* actor, and also by a clearly visible dais on which the musicians who accompany the Kabuki performance (two singing narrators and a man playing the *shamisen*) are sitting [Photo No. 5; MNK VI-4220].

These examples all belong to the vast tendency to present actors as the popular heroes of the period. On the occasion of presenting a unique woodblock print which exists in only three copies,<sup>4</sup> I should mention the so-called 'close-ups of the large heads' (the *okubi-e*) style of portraits, developed by Tōshūsai Sharaku (1794–1795)<sup>5</sup>. As one of the most enigmatic artists of the Japanese *Ukiyo-e* genre, he possessed a keen sense of observation which manifested in the slightly caricatured portrayals of the actors' faces and poses in their characteristic roles [Photo No. 6; MNK VI-4464]. This type of presentation concentrated mainly on the distinctive features of the actor and his theatrical abilities, rather than on the characteristics of the hero or heroine of the drama.

This style was used to make prints commemorating the actors' anniversaries, name changing ceremonies and prominent milestones in an actor's career, such as an outstanding, unforgettable role which raised the actor's name to the hall of fame.

The end of the eighteenth century brought about more new ideas. Prominent examples of these are found in the works of Kitagawa Utamaro (1754–1806), an artist and an expert on feminine beauty. He claimed that he did not care for *yakusha-e* actor prints himself;<sup>6</sup> however, due to the huge demand of the audience he created a few series portraying dramatic characters. Among them are the tragic lovers from the plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon, such as

<sup>4</sup> One of the three existing copies is kept in the National Museum in Kraków. In 1920, a Polish collector Feliks Jasiński (1861–1929) gave the print along with his whole art collection to the museum.

<sup>5</sup> In 2009, a groundbreaking discovery took place: a team of Japanese researchers managed to identify the artist who had hidden for over two centuries under the pseudonym of Sharaku. The artist was in fact Saitō Jūrobē, a Nō actor in the employ of the lord of Awa. For details of this discovery, see the essay by Kobayashi Tadashi 'The *Ukiyo-e* painting by Sharaku Discovered in Greece' in: *Sharaku and other hidden Japanese Masterworks from the land of Nausicaa* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Many artists earned their living painting portraits of actors. This is why Utamaro, who emphasised his position of an artist, rejected the mainstream trend of *yakusha-e* portraits.

Osan and Mohei [MNK VI — Kitagawa Utamaro; see: Photo No. 7; MNK VI-723].<sup>7</sup> This style of portrait marked a return to prints showing the characters of the play, and not the particular actors. Although the popularity of the play *Koi Hake Hashiragoyomi* (The Almanac of Love) was largely due to the theatrical performances, on the prints the characters remain in the fictional world.<sup>8</sup>

There are compositions that break the rules of these two styles, with characteristic opposition to the actors' portraits set strictly within the theatre [Photo No. 5; MNK VI-4220] that significantly go beyond the fictional space [Photo No. 7; MNK VI-723] and yet keep some inconsistencies. The marvellous artistic woodblock prints of Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) are great examples of this. Kuniyoshi possessed an exceptional artistic awareness, and was an erudite man with great sensitivity. His works show a baffling breaking from the established rules and often feature singular inconsistencies even within one print [Photo No. 8; MNK VI-3739abc].

A great example of this is the image of a scene between three characters from a play: two men and a woman,<sup>9</sup> set in a perfect winter landscape. This print goes beyond the theatrical conventions, yet at the same time it maintains an exceptionally strong connection with the theatre, as the actor Iwai Kumesaburō is still featured as a stage actor in a *yaroboshi* cap and with the attributes of the *onnagata*.

Another example showing an even greater lack of consistency in its portrayal of actors/dramatic characters is another print by Kuniyoshi [Photo No. 9; MNK VI-3667ab]. While in the previous image only the *onnagata* keeps with the theatrical conventions, here — in a scene between two women — we see a completely different way of portraying two equal characters. The print is a portrait of two Kabuki actors in the popular play *Kagamiya Gonichi no Iwafuji*. This marvelous tension-filled composition, depicting a fight using *naginata* blades, in some ways keeps with the theatrical convention. This interpretation is due to the static nature of the decorations featuring a neutral ground, and also the *yaroboshi* on the shaved forehead of the actor playing Ohatsu, the younger woman. However, the other actor who plays the part of the standing Iwafuji, does not have the inherent attributes of an *onnagata*; thus, his portrayal breaks the theatrical convention and moves the action into a literary reality.

The *shini-e*, i.e. posthumous memorial prints, are proof of the great attachment to seeing the actors through the tradition of their theatrical roles. An example, *Three actors from the Iwai family* [Photo No. 10; MNK VI-4851], is a part of the collection of the National Museum in Kraków.

<sup>7</sup> The print entitled *Osan and Mobei* belongs to the series of prints: *True Feelings Compared*; originally created in 1798–1799 (later impression).

<sup>8</sup> This is the case for both the Kabuki and the Bunraku theatre.

<sup>9</sup> The male roles were played by: Ichikawa Danjūrō and Bandō Mitsugoro; whereas the female part was played by the *onnagata* Iwai Kumesaburō.

This is an exceptional example of the posthumous memorial prints. Published in the year of the death of Iwai Hanshirō V (1776–1847), the oldest of the three actors (depicted in the *tondo*), it also pays homage to the younger two actors, who died some time before. The tradition, cultivated by the families who provided the education of the *onnagata*, is reflected in the names given to them. Although each portrait features an actor's name, they are also represented with the name of one of the characters they played in the Kabuki theatre (Romanowicz, 2011: 128–129) [Photo No. 11; MNK VI-3738abc].

The connection between the two worlds — the Kabuki Theatre and the *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints — within the visual arts of the Edo period in Japan, remains a great starting point for thinking about many issues, including: the real characters in a drama (based on the environments depicted); the actors as celebrities of the time (in occasional prints, portraits without backgrounds, the actor's clan crest, memorial prints, etc.); and the irregularity of depicting the Kabuki world and its heroes (in the context of the actors' awareness of a diversity of gender problems). I would like to emphasize the importance of the audience's consciousness of the actor's roles (male *tachiyaku*, female *onnagata*) and pay special consideration to the characters of the dramas, and to the breaking of the conventions between the real actor and his stage *emploi* [Photo No. 12; MNK VI-3738abc].

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1. Torii Kiyomasu II, *Actors Sanjō Kantarō and Ichimura Takenojō as young lovers in the drama Yaoya Osbichi*, Japan, circa 1750, MNK VI-4206 (National Museum in Kraków)



2. Katsukawa Shunkō, *Actor Ichikawa Danjūrō V on the stage*, Japan, circa 1790, MNK VI-794 (National Museum in Kraków)



3. Utagawa Toyokuni, *The Actor Nakamura Noshiō as the shirabyōshi dancer Yokobue*, Japan, 1799, MNK VI-4101 (National Museum in Kraków)



4. Utagawa Toyokuni, *The Actor Segawa Rokō IV in the play Onna Shibaraku*, Japan, 1807, MNK VI-4104 (National Museum in Kraków)



5. Torii Kiyonaga, *Actors Ichikawa Monnosuke II as Soga-no-Gorō and Segawa Kikunojō II as Tsukisayo*, Japan, 1782, MNK VI-4220 (National Museum in Kraków)



6. Tōshūsai Sharaku, *Kōraiya Kinshō (The Actor Ichikawa Komazō III)*, Japan, 1794, MNK VI-4464 (National Museum in Kraków)



7. Kitagawa Utamaro, *Lovers Osan and Mobei* from the series: *True Feelings Compared: The Founts of Love*, Japan, circa 1798–1799, MNK VI-723  
(National Museum in Kraków)



8. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Actors Ichikawa Danjūrō, Bandō Mitsugoro and Iwai Kumesaburō*, Japan, before 1843 MNK VI-3739abc (National Museum in Kraków)



9. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Two women in a duel*,  
Japan, 1849, MNK VI-3667ab (National Museum in Kraków)



10. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Three actors from the Iwai family*,  
Japan, 1847, MNK VI-4851 (National Museum in Kraków)



11. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Actors performing in the drama Godairiki Koi no Fujime*, Japan, 1847, MNK VI-3738abc (National Museum in Kraków)



12. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Actors performing in the drama Godairiki Koi no Fujime*, Japan, 1847, MNK VI-3738abc (National Museum in Kraków)