

# ***Onnagata* as a Career Choice for Gender-Variant Men in the Tokugawa and Meiji Periods**

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18th International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS), Poznań, Poland, 27-30 August 2026



**Funded by  
the European Union**

# Introduction

The paper aims to present material and observations about a group of biological males from late Edo and early Meiji periods who:

- Adopted a feminine gender performance
- Had romantic and sexual relationships with male partners
- Pursued careers as *onnagata*

In the first part, the paper analyses testimonies about these subjects drawn from “miscellanies” (*zuihitsu*) for the Edo period and newspaper articles for the Meiji period

The paper examines:

- How the testimonies discussed the subjects' interest for dressing and behaving like women and their sexual and romantic preference for male partners
- How the testimonies construct working as *onnagata* as connected to their gender performance and sexual and romantic preference

In the second part, the paper overviews:

- How cross-dressing and behaving in a feminine way emerged as characteristics of *onnagata* for ritual and artistic reasons
- How Kabuki actors also doubled as prostitutes who had mainly male patrons out of economic necessity

The paper argues that the subjects resorted to working as *onnagata* as a cultural resource which facilitated their assumption of a feminine gender performance and having male partners

The paper aims to achieve 3 objectives:

- To retrieve information about the lives of gender-variant individuals in Japanese history
- To understand the gendering practices the subjects employed
- To analyse the connection between gender, sexuality and the Kabuki theatre from the lens of gender, sexual and cultural history

The paper contributes to the state of the art in 2 ways

Numerous researchers, such as Jennifer Robertson, Watanabe Tamotsu, Murakami Tatau, Katherine Mezur and Isaka Maki have studied *onnagata* macrosocially to comprehend how onnagata performed gender on stage and to reconstruct how gender was conceptualised in the society and culture of the time

The paper takes a microsociological approach and investigates why specific subjects acted as onnagata to shape their gender performances and meet their sexual and romantic preferences

Gary Leupp, Gregory Pflugfelder and Makoto Takemitsu have explored how *onnagata* became popular objects of fascination for men in discourses on male-male desire

The paper focuses on how specific subjects worked as *onnagata* to pursue relationships with men

Mitsuhashi Junko has examined testimonies about *onnagata* to understand how they performed gender through clothing, how they were often tied to male-male love and how society viewed and reacted to them

The paper follows Mitsuhashi's biographical approach, but it is more interested in reconstructing the point of view of the subjects themselves

# Part 1: The Testimonies

In *Waka no hokakushō* (first half of the nineteenth century), the *Kokugakusha* Motoori Uchitō (1792-1855) discusses a category of young males who, because of their “disposition” (*seishitsu*), dressed, spoke and behaved like women

They “enjoyed” (*konomu*) “being anally penetrated” (*osamu/osasemu*) by men

They imitated *onnagata* and frequently attended theatres

In *Kumo no itomaki* (c. 1846-1850), Santō Kyōzan (1769-1858) writes about Jinkichi, an *onnagata* active at the end of the An'ei era (1772-1781)  
Jinkichi spoke and behaved like a woman and "enjoyed" (*konomi*) having "romantic relationships" (*jō*) with men

In *Osaka nishikiga shinwa* n. 5 (c. 1872), a journalist reports about a male who assumed a feminine appearance and worked as an itinerant *onnagata*



Illustration from *Osaka nishikiga shinwa* n. 5 (c. 1872)

Source: Tsuchiya 1995

In *Yomiuri shinbun* 29/5/1875, a journalist explains that many males who desired to dress like women out of an “innate interest” (*ōrai*) pursued careers as *onnagata*

In *Yomiuri shinbun* 12/4/1878, a journalist writes about a man who worked as an *onnagata* out of an “innate interest” (*ōrai*) in behaving like a woman

In *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* n. 2470 from 30/4/1881 and *Yomiuri shinbun* 30/4/1881, journalists record the case of a male named Ifuba Kotoji (born 1856)

Ifuba dressed and behaved like a woman both onstage and off and used their appearance to have sex with a man

Based on a sentence emitted by an anonymous judge, the judge and the *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* journalist claim that Ifuba “enjoyed being anally penetrated” (*keikan saruru wo konomi*)

For this reason, Ifuba dressed and behaved like a woman

In summary, the sources state that a small number of males had an innate interest or disposition for dressing, speaking and behaving like women and also enjoyed having romantic and sexual relationships with male partners. To meet these interests, they pursued careers as *onnagata*

## Part 2: Cross-Dressing, Gendered Behaviour and Prostitution in Kabuki Theatre

Cross-dressing emerged as a foundational element of Kabuki theatre already in the first performances by Izumo no Okuni (c. 1572-1613)

In the textual and visual depictions found in *Kabuki no sōshi* (early seventeenth century) and *Okuni Kabuki zubyōbu* (early seventeenth century), Okuni wears her hair short in a topknot, a *haori* jacket and a short sword, items worn by *kabukimono*

Okuni performed a dance called "man's dance" (*otokomai*)

According to Miura Jōshin (1565-1644) in *Sozoro monogatari* (1641) and to Kanzawa Tokō (1710-1795) in *Okinagusa* (1771-1792), Okuni imitated the style of the *shirabyōshi*, a group of ritual specialists active approximately from the mid-twelfth to the sixteenth century

*Shirabyōshi* wore court tall hats, white upper garments (*suikan*) and brought short swords, items worn by courtier men starting from the Kamakura period

*Shirabyōshi* performed a dance called *otokomai* with which they appeased the gods  
Possibly, Okuni revived the techniques of the *shirabyōshi* for their ritual and spectacular value

Alongside Okuni, Nagoya Sanzaburō (1572 or 1576 - 1603) acted in female roles by wearing feminine clothes, hairstyles and makeup  
It is plausible that Nagoya cross-dressed to fit into the performances that Okuni had popularised

It is also possible that Nagoya's cross-dressing was inspired by pre-existing ritual performances, in particular to shows of dancing and acting known as *ranbyōshi*, a type of religious performances that took place in Buddhist monasteries, holy mountains and sacred sites in general where boys and young men appeared on stage dressed as women

After Okuni and Nagoya's passing, later actresses and actors appeared onstage wearing the clothes, hairstyles and accessories of the opposite gender until women's Kabuki was banned and the role of the *onnagata* was institutionalised

*Onnagata* cross-dressed onstage and could assume feminine behaviours both onstage and in their everyday lives

Yoshizawa Ayame (1673-1719) famously says in *Ayamegusa* (1776) that *onnagata* need to polish their skills by behaving like women onstage as well as offstage

In conclusion, cross-dressing emerged in Kabuki theatre for its ritual and spectacular value and behaving like a woman became a necessity to achieve a high-level artistic performance

Prostitution was a practice well ingrained in the Kabuki world

According to Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693) in *Nanshoku ōkagami* (1687) V 1, all categories of Kabuki actors worked as prostitutes by answering the calls of patrons and owners of houses of assignation to entertain customers at parties and excursions and with love-making

In VII 1, Saikaku details the financial struggles of a boy actor who has to meet unattractive clients to earn money. In the end, a patron ransoms him

In VII 3, another actor says that meeting wealthy patrons is the only way to make a living. However, he deserts them out of devotion for a lover and, without the support of his customers, he finds himself in crushing debt and commits suicide

Saikaku describes how prostitution was a resource to earn money and how pleasing clients was difficult and degrading but also key for survival

In *Bandō Tarō gōtō monogatari* (1824-1825) by Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822), a boy is sold to a brothel as a *kagama*, an *onnagata* apprentice or prostitute who imitated the style of *onnagata*, for the money necessary to keep his destitute family afloat

Prostitution functioned as a parallel business to which Kabuki actors resorted out of economic necessity

In summary, *onnagata* cross-dressed, behaved like women and could have sexual encounters with male partners because these were professional requirements that developed for ritual, artistic and financial reasons. A small group of biological males chose this line of work to facilitate their adoption of a feminine gender performance and to have erotic and romantic liaisons with men.

# Conclusion

The paper has explored testimonies of gender-variant individuals from Japanese history, focusing the attention on a small number of males from the late Edo and early Meiji periods

According to authors of miscellanies and newspaper journalists, the subjects dressed, spoke and behaved in ways that the culture and society of the time associated with women

The subjects behaved in these manners out of their “dispositions” (*seishitsu*) or out of their “innate interests” (*ōrai*)

The subjects “enjoyed” (*konomu/konomi*) having relationships with male partners for their “sentimental” (*jō*) aspect and/or to have anal sex (*osamu/osasemu, keikan*)

In Kabuki theatre, *onnagata* practised cross-dressing and adopted feminine behaviours and mannerisms because of ritual and artistic reasons

Kabuki actors frequently worked as prostitutes, most often meeting male patrons, out of economic necessity

Working as an *onnagata* allowed an actor to dress and behave like a woman and to have relationships with men

Since the subjects wished to behave like women and to entertain relationships with male partners, they pursued careers as *onnagata* as a cultural resource that facilitated their adoption of a feminine gender and finding male partners

By conducting this research, the paper has hopefully advanced the knowledge about the existence and lifeways of gender-variant individuals in the history of Japan and their gendering practices

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*Thank you for listening*

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