

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

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

Short Abstract

The paper examines the reasons why a few gender-variant men in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods worked as *onnagata*, arguing that:

- they derived bodily pleasure from wearing women's clothes and having sex with men;
- the job as *onnagata* allowed them to satisfy those interests.

Long Abstract

As is well known, the *onnagata* is an actor in Kabuki theatre who specialises in female roles. Numerous researchers have studied this category of actors to understand how gender was conceptualised during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). What is less known is that in the second half of the Tokugawa period and in the early Meiji period (1868-1912) a few men pursued a career as *onnagata* to facilitate their adoption of a feminine gender performance. This paper will explore the reasons why said men assumed a feminine gender performance and why they used Kabuki as a cultural resource to reach this end. To answer the first point, the paper will argue that these men derived bodily pleasure from wearing women's clothes and hairstyles and from having sex with men. To answer the second point, the paper will suggest that reciting as an *onnagata* involved cross-dressing as a technique that allowed men to impersonate female characters and *onnagata* often doubled as prostitutes for men. Since working as an *onnagata* included cross-dressing and having sex with men, the subjects under study saw the job as a viable way to satisfy their interests. As primary sources, to address the first point the paper will use the *zuihitsu Kumo no itomaki* (ca. 1846-1850) by Santō Kyōzan (1769-1858), the *Kokugaku* treatise *Waka no hokakushō* (ca. 1850) by Motoori Uchitō (1792-1885), and newspaper articles in *Osaka nishikiga shinwa* 5/ca. 1872, *Yomiuri shinbun* 30/04/1881, and *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* 2470/1881, while to address the second point *Ayamegusa* (ca. 1776) about the famed *onnagata* Yoshizawa Ayame I (1673-1729). The paper will adopt the approaches of cultural history, gender history, and sexuality history as well as Sherry Ortner's practice theory. To interpret the sources, the paper will use the life history methodology and historical discourse analysis. The paper will fill an important gap in the state of the art as it will advance our knowledge about the lived experiences of gender-variant individuals in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan and how they used available cultural customs to express their genders.

Introduction

Hello, everyone.

My name is Daniele Durante and I am a postdoctoral researcher at Ca' Foscari University and a visiting researcher at Kanagawa University. I thank the organisers of the conference for having me here today. My areas of specialisation are cultural history, gender history and sexual history applied to Japanese studies. I am currently working on retrieving testimonies about gender-variant individuals, i.e. individuals who exhibit appearances and behaviours that do not conform to contemporary societal and cultural expectations, from Japanese history. In this paper I would like to present material and observations about a category of gender-variant individuals who have frequently appeared during my archival research, a group of biological males from the late Edo and the early Meiji periods who adopted a feminine gender performance, had romantic and sexual relationships with male partners and pursued careers as *onnagata*, actors of Kabuki theatre who were specialised in female roles.

In the first part of the paper, we will see testimonies about these subjects drawn from “miscellanies” (*zuihitsu*) for the Edo period and newspaper articles for the Meiji period and we will see how these testimonies discussed the subjects' interest for dressing and behaving like women and their sexual and romantic preference for male partners and how they construct working as *onnagata* as connected to their gender performance and sexual and romantic preference. In the second part, we will see a short overview of how cross-dressing and behaving in a feminine way emerged as characteristics of *onnagata* for ritual and artistic reasons and how Kabuki actors also doubled as prostitutes who had mainly male patrons out of economic necessity. In the end, I will argue that the subjects worked as *onnagata* because this job required them to dress and behave like women and have relationships with male customers and this allowed them to meet their interests. In summary, 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 three 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 two ways:

- Numerous researchers, such as Jennifer Robertson, Watanabe Tamotsu, Murakami Tatau, Katherine Mezur and Isaka Maki have studied *onnagata* macrosocially trying 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 concerning male-male desire; on the other hand, this paper focuses on how specific subjects

worked as *onnagata* to pursue relationships with men. Of particular mention is the contribution of Mitsuhashi Junko, who has examined testimonies about *onnagata* to understand how they performed gender through clothing and how they often were tied to male-male love and also how society viewed and reacted to them. The paper follows Mitsuhashi's biographical approach, but it is more interested in reconstructing not how the community acted towards *onnagata* and same-sex liaisons, but the point of view of the subjects themselves.

First Part: 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. Furthermore, they “enjoyed” (*konomu*) “being anally penetrated” (*osamu/osasemu*) by men. To meet their interests, 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), who 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*. The accompanying illustration shows the subject wearing female clothes and hairstyle and in a kneeling pose that is often seen in illustrations that represent female characters of theatre pieces during a dramatic scene.

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, the journalists record the case of a twenty-six-years-old male named Ifuba Kotoji (born 1856) who worked as an *onnagata*. As part of their job, Ifuba dressed and behaved like a woman apparently both onstage and off and used their appearance to have sex with a man who thought Ifuba was a woman. Based on the sentence that an anonymous judge emitted because the two broke a law against anal sex between males promulgated in 1873, the judge and the *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* journalist claim that Ifuba “enjoyed being anally penetrated” (*keikan saruru wo konomi*) and it was for this reason that 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*.

I would like to suggest that the subjects chose to work as *onnagata* because this job required actors to dress and behave like women and often to double as prostitutes.

Part Two: 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), the legendary founder of Kabuki theatre itself. In the textual and visual depictions found in *Kabuki no sōshi* (early seventeenth century) and *Okuni Kabuki zubyōbu* (early seventeenth century), Okuni is shown wearing her hair short in a topknot, a *haori* jacket and a short sword, all items usually worn by male adults who were part of a group of social dissidents known as *kabukimono*. Furthermore, 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 who were active approximately from the mid-twelfth to the sixteenth century and wore court tall hats, white upper garments known as *suikan* and brought short swords, all items worn by courtier men starting from the Kamakura period. Furthermore, *shirabyōshi* performed a dance called *otokomai* with which they appeased the gods. It is possible that 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 in order to fit into the performances that Okuni had already popularised. It is also possible that, much like Okuni’s cross-dressing, 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. On this point, 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.

Analogously to cross-dressing, prostitution, too, 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. Out of the 20 stories that compose the second part of the work, which are all dedicated to Kabuki actors, *onnagata* feature in 9 of them, suggesting that Saikaku deems them as the most attractive category of actors for their charm and artistic sophistication. In VII 1, Saikaku details the financial struggles of a boy actor who has to meet unattractive clients to earn enough 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 soon finds himself in crushing debt and commits suicide. In this manner, Saikaku describes how prostitution was a resource to earn money and how pleasing clients was difficult and degrading but key for survival. Similarly, in *Bandō Tarō gōtō monogatari* (1824-1825) by Shikitei Sanba

(1776-1822), a boy is sold to a brothel as a *kagema*, an *onnagata* apprentice or prostitute who imitated the style of *onnagata*, for the money necessary to keep his destitute family afloat. In conclusion, prostitution functioned as a parallel business to which Kabuki actors resorted out of economic necessity.

In summary, the *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

In this paper we have explored testimonies of gender-variant individuals from Japanese history. We have focused our attention on a small number of males from the late Edo and the early Meiji periods who, according to authors of miscellanies and newspaper journalists, dressed, spoke and behaved in ways that the culture and society of the time associated with women out of their “dispositions” (*seishitsu*) or out of their “innate interests” (*ōrai*). Furthermore, the subjects “enjoyed” (*konomu/konomi*) having relationships with male partners for their “sentimental” (*jō*) aspect and/or to have anal sex (*osamu/osasemu, keikan*). We have seen how in Kabuki theatre *onnagata*, actors specialised in female roles, practised cross-dressed and adopted feminine behaviours and mannerisms because of ritual and artistic reasons. Furthermore, Kabuki actors frequently worked also as prostitutes, most often meeting male patrons, out of economic necessity. In this way, 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, we have hopefully advanced our knowledge about the existence and the lifeways of gender-variant individuals in the history of Japan and the gendering practices and the cultural resources they used.

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101149192.

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