

Interactions between Humor and Gender in Japan

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Abstract

This paper articulates the specificities of humor to gender roles, within a specific Japanese context, before concluding on the central concept of performance. It does not claim to determine the ultimate nature of Japanese humor or to exhibit its definite colorations; instead, a few illustrations outline the contributions of gender patterns, of male and female roles (in real practices and their representations) in the *construction* of humor in Japanese culture. Construction refers to the historical production, through language, of both humor and gender –and in particular their reciprocal influence studied by historians, sociologists, anthropologists and linguists alike.

Humor importantly reflects people's ways of thinking and living. Japanese jokes do not reveal fixed male and female categories but sexual formations and transgressions. As such, humor paves the way for thinking about, and experiencing gender as a creative process. More specifically, an assumption that humor creates some kind of *order* will give the paper its impetus. In a country whose patriarchal hierarchy has been said to intensify gender differences, one would expect the exaggerations of humor to mirror, delineate, and why not at times contest such differences. The paper therefore comments on this order created by comical amplifications of differences between masculinity and femininity in Japanese society.

Keywords: humor; gender; language; work; Japan

Articulating humor and gender

A vast array of writings has been concerned with questions about gender and humor (Nilsen and Nilsen 2008: 259; Carrell 2008: 310-311). Relatively recent literature tends to underline differences in nature between male and female types of humor, sometimes for lack of cultural (that is, historical, geographical, linguistic) contextualization. However the mere difficulty –and manifold impossibilities– of translating humor indicates that one cannot readily laugh about that which, due to cultural specificity, is bound to remain elusive. In this respect, studies that are clearly situated have an advantage over cross-cultural generalizations. But such generalizations are still helpful in that they complement, somewhat paradoxically, the regional idiosyncrasies they are based upon. Thus on the one hand, the relationships that humor and gender entertain in Japan may inspire comments about the nature of male and female humor in general; and whilst Japan has disappeared from the equation, some typical features of Japanese jocularity may be identified as universal on the other. In the end, it seems vain to try and assess the proportion of the literature on humor that is relevant to the Japanese case and, conversely, how much of the paper applies to this literature at large.

For example Kotthoff (2006: 13–16) contends among others that “in many cultures,” feminine humor avoids overt aggression whereas male humor displays “competence in verbal (and physical) fighting”. This is consistent with observations of aggressive and “obscene” –though the puritanism of the word makes me laugh– behavior among either pre-school boys or adult males, in contrast to young girls and women who are expected, precisely, to “behave.” Kotthoff takes this opportunity to conjure up an important, strategic aspect of joking, which consists in addressing topics in *implicit*

rather than obvious ways. Women are nevertheless universal victims of sexually *explicit* jokes, and favor more intimate forms of humor dealing with the disappointments and constraints they experience in everyday life. Swords (1992: 78) and Holmes (2006a: 30) report similar findings according to which male humor is more hostile and sexual than the personal anecdotes and empathetic stories that typify women's humor. Female jokes are inclusive, supportive, and self-healing whilst their male counterparts prefer exclusive, challenging and self-aggrandizing humor. Crawford (1992: 30–31) concludes that a good sense of humor is often gender-linked, namely men are liable to come up with competitive and somehow more creative jokes. She assimilates this belief to "differences in conversational goals" –women would seek intimacy and men positive self-presentation.

Much research has reproduced rather than challenge the stereotype of humorless women (Johnston, Mumby and Westwood 2007: 119–120; Schnurr 2009: 107). Yet women's absence from many forms of humor is linked to the social control exercised over them (Palmer 1994: 71; Ross 1998: 99; Gilbert 2004: 26–27). Given women have fewer choices outside their expected gender roles, Kotthoff (2000) argues that they develop greater "role distance" than men. This greater distance between how they see themselves and the patriarchal norms they have to endure shapes their style of humor and makes them more easily prone to accept humor at their own expense. As a result, humor at one's own expense does not necessarily imply a weak sense of self-respect; it might as well convey "a very specific sense of self-respect." Is this very specific sense about resisting, or through sublimation tolerating patriarchy? Kotthoff does not venture further. But some studies of humor in the workplace have challenged the argument that women use fewer instances of humor and appreciate it less than men (Kuipers 2008: 375; Schnurr 2009: 107–108). For Holmes and Marra (2002: 1706), women's humor shows their unwillingness to accept the values of a male-dominated business world. Holmes (2006a; 2006b: 117–137) provides evidence from New Zealand that comical gender stereotyping can maintain good relations among colleagues. Consequently, time and again humor portrays women as sexual objects offered to the scopophilic gaze of a male audience; but in other instances it can contest the (stereo)typical gendered patterns of behavior, at work and elsewhere.

Having briefly reviewed a number of topical texts on the ways in which humor intersect with gender, it is now time to introduce a cultural variable in the name of Japan, and clarify its significance for humor research.

Specificities of Japanese humor

Whilst there is an extensive literature in Japanese about Japanese humor, few books in English (Wells 1995; Cohn 1998; Hibbett 2002; Davis 2006) have focused on the subject. This relative paucity of information directed towards English-speaking readers is unfortunate because, in spite of some universal traits of humor overviewed above, people do not laugh about the same things at any point in time and space. Here and now, there and then, the Japanese sense of humor might seem mysterious to the non-Japanese, just as the Japanese might be at a loss when hearing a foreign joke (e.g. Lewis 2005: 151–152). Already in the penultimate chapter of *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, published in 1894, mutual incomprehension is expressed in the contrast between the "angry faces" of foreigners, as seen by the Japanese, and the "Japanese smile" which for foreigners betrays insincerity (Hearn 2007: 657). Today there is an enduring belief among westerners that Japanese humor does not really exist or that the Japanese take everything literally (Zola 2010: 143–146; Okada 2012: 180; Pons 2012). Davies (1998: 40) has claimed for example that "the paucity of Japanese jokes of any kind remains an enigma", following a tradition that characterizes Japanese humor by its absence:

Noguchi was not entirely exaggerating when he complained, in a 1904 article, that (...) [the Japanese] did not know how to laugh, they regarded laughter as degenerate, and Japanese humorists were content with clever wordplay (Marx 2007: 148).

Such “Japan lacks a true sense of humor” stereotypes rest upon the assumption that people laugh about the same things anywhere and anywhen, that jokes manifest themselves in translatable and transferrable ways. In other words, they result from a lack of fluency in Japanese and/or naïve yet persistent parochialisms and ethnocentrism –in short, from deficiencies in cultural sensitivity. However nothing can be inherently, unquestionably, eternally or universally funny. The very concept of joke is conditioned by the historical and spatial circumstances through which it acquired its present status and contagious power of the joke. Moreover, jokes will elicit different reactions depending on people’s age, language, education, social position, gender, sexuality, and other variables that shape their identity in a given temporal and local context. The meaning of a joke depends on the context in which it is told (Palmer 1994: 69; Billig 2005: 158).

The case of the Japanese smile above, for example, reveals an ignorance of socio-cultural norms of communication through which humor happens to be confused with deceiving “signs” of humor. Cultural aspects of humor are for this reason worth disseminating. The Japanese smile does not always signify amusement, pleasure or relaxation. A silent language of propriety as part of a social obligation (*giri*), it may communicate embarrassment and even grief (Clapier-Valladon 1991: 259). Awareness of this sort of cultural specificity sheds light on the anecdote of the Japanese maid in Yokohama who, “smiling as if something very pleasant had happened,” asks her mistress permission to attend her husband’s funeral. She returns in the evening and, showing the little urn that contains the husband’s ashes, says with a laugh: “that is my husband.” Hearn (2007: 660, 669) suggests that this laugh is “politeness carried to the utmost point of self-abnegation.” In Oda’s (2006: 18) words the Japanese smile is of “exquisite consideration for others and indicate[s] a desire not to place burdens upon their feelings.”

Comparative research on humor attempts to eschew parochialism and deliver instructive clues on what makes the Japanese laugh. Thus Blyth (quoted in Dodge 1996: 58–59) outlines traditional western comedy as “just wit, without any increase of our wisdom or understanding of life”; classic Japanese humor is not exempt from vulgarities but, by way of contrast, offers deeper meanings and didactic resources. He regards such humor as “almost kind in nature, lacking the personal invective and general abuse found in many western forms of humor.” Wells (1995) elucidates other differences in her book *Japanese Humour*. She labels “expurgation” the process through which English speakers censor certain humorous forms, from religious offenses to “toilet jokes” and other humiliations. Then she argues that Japanese culture prefers “containment,” which means that humor is more narrowly acceptable in particular situations or “containers” (such as in performances or in the presence of alcohol); at the same time the ethical rules of humor within containers are more broadly defined, hence some Japanese jokes might seem crude or puerile or extreme to English speakers. In fact, foreigners recurrently denigrate Japanese humor, locating its roots in voyeurism, sadism and masochism, and its organization around unsubtle characters such as incompetent doctors, cheated partners, naïve feminists or contestants in awkward situations on TV shows (Karadimos 2009: 385). Meanwhile Takekuro’s (2006: 90, 94) comparison of English and Japanese jokes refers to the requirement for contextualization introduced earlier. Japanese conversation evades jokes with business acquaintances, new people and strangers, even in informal settings. Takekuro stresses that “Japanese jokes are limited to situations in which participants know each other well and the degree of formality is low.” By contrast, English jokes circulate in conversation regardless of the participants and degree of formality. This is consistent, she explains, with the adjustments of one’s behavior to the context (people, place and occasion) in which

exchanges take place in Japan. Oda (2006: 18) has accordingly identified “laughter places” (*warai no ba*) where it is socially appropriate to laugh openly, from drinking places to flower viewing (*hanami*) sites. Notwithstanding their specific relation to humor studies, both Wells’ “containers” and Oda’s “laughter places” resonate with Goffman’s (1974) borrowing of Bateson’s (1972) *frames*, which enclose a “special reality” isolated from everyday reality, or with Foucault’s (1994: 752-762; 2004) *heterotopias*, these “other spaces” absolutely disparate from their surroundings –these spaces that our imagination has turned into real utopias.

Ben-Ari (2002: 134) depicts in this vein a “forgetting-the-hardships-of-the-year party” (*bōnenkai*) organized in 1982 by the sports promotion committee of two communities near Kyoto. As *karaoke* songs – including some men’s amusing attempts at impersonating female stars – punctuate conversations, things gradually warm up:

people told jokes and funny, often lewd, stories. Conversations wove in and out of a variety of themes in rapid succession. It often consisted of series of quick wisecracks, one-liners, retorts and quips which produced much laughter. Little by little, the participants began to show greater and greater familiarity. The language used began to assume the direct and rather guttural masculine form. People sat shoulder to shoulder, they hugged each other and looked into each other’s eyes. Some lay on the floor, while others shouted or laughed loudly. Finally, as the evening wore on some would open their slacks and scratch their groins.

In this extract people adapt their behavior to the festive, permissive circumstances of a party which takes place in a specially designated drinking frame, an alternative spatio-temporal reality –it is away from both work and home, in a separate room within the inn, on a Saturday evening as opposed to a working day, and finally rituals of togetherness (speeches, *karaoke* songs and so forth) clearly unbind this “other space” from everyday routines. Eased by the temporary abolishment of dress codes and statuses, solidarity is expressed and encouraged by including everyone around one table, and toasting to celebrate the impact of individuals on their organization. Humor plays a major role in the formation of this collective spirit. People within the drinking frame expose facets of their identity they had hitherto concealed: in their infantile and boisterous language, in their female-male impersonations, they deliberately violate etiquette and disrupt an order existing outside the frame (section 1.4 connects the functions of such practices to that of the carnival). The “social nudity” that results from individuals stripping off social masks is positively received in Japan, where both inebriated stupidity and demonstration of human sympathy can be signs of manliness (Lebra 1976: 110, 118–119). Hence, excesses are very likely to be forgiven and forgotten when people are back to the reality of work. Ben-Ari (2002: 139) concludes that the *bōnenkai* creates “a frame where a dominant principle is that of a group that transcends individuals, and is more than the sum of its parts.” Further, this frame can be read as a miniature ideal community –the “in-group” (*uchi*, see below).

The *bōnenkai* account epitomizes how Japanese humor aims to produce harmony with interlocutors, whereas English jokes are permeated with self-assertion and individual expression (Takekuro 2006; Inoue 2006: 32; Ōshima 2006: 105–107). This is why in Japan farce and wry humor will be preferred over satire (Wells 2006: 209). Attitudes towards jokes and joking are accordingly constrained, unlike that of English-language speakers, by clear separations between the “in-group” of family members, partners and close acquaintances (*uchi*), the “out-group” of colleagues and neighbors (*soto*), and the complete strangers or outsiders with whom one is hardly in contact (*yoso*). Japanese studies routinely clarify the crucial significance of this ‘inside/outside’ (*uchi/soto*) division among other related binaries (Vogel 1963; Lebra 1976: 112; Peak 1991: 7–8, 16, 189; Lebra 1992: 6–17; Kondo 1992; Rosenberger 1992; Johnson 1993: 219–223; Bachnik 1994; McConnell 2000: 210, 220, 223;

McVeigh 2000; Maynard 2002: 402-403; Sugimoto 2003: 28–29, 36; Hendry 2003: 47–49; Carroll 2006: 115; Martinez 2006; Inouye 2008: 90, 94). Takekuro's (2006: 96) data shows that Japanese jokes were all observed in *uchi*. None appeared in *soto* or *yoso*.

Representations of gender in Japanese culture

Not only do *uchi* and *soto* throw light on the conditions of production of Japanese humor, they are also associated to the *female* and *male* domains respectively; for even if this classification does not turn out to be inflexible (Stefánsson 1998: 159) and even if it has been ideologically used by Japanese theorists of “Japaneness” (*nihonjinron*) as well as their foreign counterparts (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986), only recently has the aphorism “man outside, woman inside” (*otokowasoto, onnawauchi*) started to decline (Cwiertka 2006: 90). Therefore *uchi/soto* and its companion concepts can help comprehend the gendered structure of language, and from then on, that of its playful forms. They demonstrate, to complement the previous subsection, that gender-based humor is but a contested territory once it has been situated in space and time. So for instance in her autobiography published in 1925, *A Daughter of the Samurai*, Sugimoto Etsu Inagaki (quoted in Dodge 1996: 64) speaks of her difficulty to adjust to the nature of humor targeted at women in the United States:

One thing in America, to which I could not grow accustomed, was the joking attitude in regard to women and money. From men and women of all classes ... I heard allusions to amusing stories of women secreting money in odd places, coaxing it from their husbands, borrowing it from a friend, or saving it secretly for some private purpose.

Gender discrimination within humor is today more likely to be directed toward Japan (whether rightly or wrongly so), in some ironical reversal of Sugimoto's accusation which only time is capable of. From a broad cultural stance, Sugimoto did not find American jokes about women very funny. Reciprocally, the narrative chaos in some contemporary Japanese comedies may take the foreigner aback.

In a way preceding the theatre of the absurd that would thrive in France between the 1940s and 1960s with Ionesco, Beckett, Genet and Adamov among others, the Japanese “nonsense genre” (*nansensumono*) was already quite popular in the 1930s. The *nansensu mono* could be defined as a decisive and why not Surrealist “victory over ... the discursive mind” (Buruma 1984: 191). In a spirit of nihilism (*nihilizumu*) that derives from Zen Buddhism, it does not attempt to connect jokes in any coherent order. The 1930s also saw the popularity of *shabekurimanzai*, the most common form of *manzai* (dialogue shows in which a pair of comedians exchanges a series of jokes) grow in Osaka. The region of Osaka (Kansai) has a reputation for innovative entertainments from general comedy (*kigeki*) to puppet theatre (*bunraku*) and *rakugo*(2.4). To compete with the rise of film in urban areas traditionally dominated by performance stages, the *shabekuri* style introduced western suits and a formal division between the wit or “sharp man” (*tsukkomi*) and the “fool” (*boke*). New Chinese characters (*kanji*) for *manzai* inaugurated this modernization (Stocker 2006: 57–59). *Manzai* later appeared on national television where Kitano Takeshi (“Beat Takeshi” in the *manzai* tradition) first built his notoriety with his friend Kaneko Kiyoshi in the 1970s. Together the two “Beats” improvised on daring themes targeting minorities and women, leading to indecent (read sexual) humor that was on several occasions censored.

Japanese humor can be more systematically based on gender issues, as in *Ranma½* – a comic (*manga*) created by star female *mangaka* Takahashi Rumiko toward the end of the 1980s and adapted as a cartoon (*anime*). The *anime* overtly deals with sexual themes rooted in what this chapter calls “gender trouble.” For *Ranma* is always in trouble in the TV series and humor draws on the reversals, confusions, uncertainties and adjustments caused by forced gender switching. *Ranma*

is a cursed male hero who turns into an attractive girl when splashed with cold water (see Pflugfelder 1992 for more examples of gender transformations and anomalies in early Japanese literature). His father transforms under similar circumstances into a giant panda. Both return to their original bodies when splashed with hot water. A frequent joke revolves around someone squeezing Ranma's breasts to ensure that he has changed into a female. Ranma sees his magic ability as a problem that he endeavors to dissimulate at school, and the humorous energy of the story stems from his efforts to avoid being splashed with water in public. According to Newitz (1995: 6–7), *Ranma ½* exploits a number of heterosexual male fears around gender transposition –the possibility, however absurd, of becoming a woman. The female, it should be said, is associated in this *anime* with passivity. As such, “Ranma stands in for male anxieties about losing power or being ridiculed.” Other comic situations cause comparable fears. For example Ranma cannot imagine being kissed by Kuno, a young man who has fallen in love with his female half (even if the dreadful act, should it happen, would involve “straight” Ranma as female). Or again, the rather tomboyish girl that Ranma falls for is ambiguously gendered. Ranma even jokes with her that his breasts when he is female are bigger than hers. Within this humor Newitz reads an implicit fear, for young heterosexual men, of turning bisexual or homosexual. Incited to identify with Kuno, for instance, they feel uneasy about Ranma’s male half since they, too, could be attracted to his female half. Fan (*otaku*) culture tends to alleviate such uneasiness by representing female Ranma as womanly as possible. On posters and T-shirts she will appear emphatically feminine in a bikini she hardly wears in the *anime*, ready for consumption as a static sex object, at a safe distance from the young male Ranma and his gender troubles. On the sticker, the T-shirt, the collectible figure, the disturbing oscillations of gender have been interrupted and femininity pinpointed –as still as a still life.

It should be concluded at this point that there is no society devoid of humor (Critchley 2002: 28). Cholley’s preface to *I am a Cat* contends that NatsumeSōseki’s (1978: 17) novel “refutes the widespread opinion that the Japanese lack humor”. In point of fact, laughter is quite simply a pillar of Japanese aesthetics. In addition to parody, satire and farce, there are more radical forms such as scatology and ludic eroticism. Exhibitions in Tokyo (2007) or Paris (2012) recounted how laughter brightened the faces of terracotta figurines in prehistoric Japan, how farting was represented in medieval scroll paintings (e.g. *Battle of the Farts*, a famous *makimonob*y KawanabeKyōsai) and literature (e.g. the anonymous *King of Farts*), and how humor bloomed in the Edo period with novels such as Jippenshalkku’s *Shank’s Mare* or the poetic genres of *kyōka* (“mad songs”) and *senryū*. The erotic art (*shunga*) on woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) belongs to the category of “pleasant images” (*warai-e*) –they precisely *bring pleasure into play*, express gratification in its dual sense, that is the sexual and the mischievous. The word *waraican* mean laughter, smile, even flower blooming. To deny *waraiis* to misunderstand Japanese art in general. Even the myths compiled in the eighth-century *Kojiki* (“Record of Ancient Matters”) state that in the beginning was... laughter! Amaterasu-ōmikami, goddess of the sun, was so infuriated by her brother that she hid in a cave, leaving the world in darkness. But intrigued by the loud guffaws of gods witnessing the misadventures of a minor divinity, she came out and light was back again (Pons 2012; Baudéan 2012). So how on earth would one disbelieve the existence of humor amongst people who were born out of heavenly bursts of laughter? Comedy films such as Itami’s masterpiece, *Tampopo*, Yaguchi’s *Waterboys* or Katsuyuki’s *Summer Time Machine Blues* among many others would inspire fertile discussions on gender roles in the Japanese sense of humor, or even on humor “in the Japanese spirit” from the *nansensu mono* to male and female codes of sensuality. Likewise, *Ranma ½* is only one example among a plethora of comical *manga* and *anime*, from Hasegawa’s *Sazae-san* and Sakura’s *Chibi Maruko-chan* to Toriyama’s *Dragon Ball* (a classic for *manga* lovers), Usui’s *Crayon Shin-chan*, Fujisawa’s *GTO* (*GurētoTichāOnizuka*) and countless others. Popular adventure, action or fantasy genres are pervaded with humor as in Punch’s *Lupin III* (*Rupan Sansei*), Hōjō’s *Cat’s Eye* and *City Hunter*, Terasawa’s *Cobra*, and so forth. Gender and sexuality prompt much hilarity. The Japanese

laugh in clubs, parties, restaurants and bistros (*izakaya*). They laugh as they watch games and talk shows on television, hosted by celebrities or “talents” (*tarento*). Upon close examination of the media, Japanese humor cultivates eroticism in its most spectacular manifestations, in its ludic forms overviewed above (voyeurism, scatology, experiments and oddities involving food, clothing, animals, machines and the like). In the TV broadcast *Takeshi’s Castle* for instance, candidates disguised as modern *samurai* are imprisoned in a castle and subject to a series of tests and stunts through which they suffer physical humiliations. An obviously softer version of the Silling castle in which Sade’s (1990) *120 Days of Sodom* take place, *Takeshi’s Castle* nevertheless exploits the same erotic drives. Many other shows are based on an incarceration whereby participants are put to the test of more or less sexual teasing. In the tradition of festivals (*matsuri*) and carnivals, the Japanese enthusiastically dress up to share the fun. Cross-dressing makes of gender a particularly important tool that triggers humor. Embedded in the seriousness of “cosplay” (*kosupure*, “costume playing”) is the jovial distance that the cosplayer creates between herself and the character she embodies –ephemeral but decidedly cathartic flight away from the ego, toward the cherished avatar or alter ego.

Another important conclusion concerns the findings that introduced the chapter, according to which female humor is more intimate and collaborative, less aggressive or more polite. But such findings could point toward a “nature” of women’s humor that would, through naïve tautological reasoning, explain everything and nothing at the same time. Rather, one must bear in mind the linguistic determinisms through which female humor has become what it is. Language participates to a remarkable extent in the constitution of gender. Irigaray (1977) has for example deplored the “phallogocentric” failure of language, which does not take women into account and eventually makes them disappear. Women become in this perspective the sex which is excluded, “which is not one”. Without going as far as Irigaray but along the same line of thought, Japanese humor should be understood in direct connection with the extremely gendered structure of the Japanese language. “There is no language,” Nakae claimed in 1888, “in which men’s everyday words and women’s everyday words are so different from each other as Japanese” (quoted in Nakamura 2008: 32). The differences between male and female idioms remain striking nowadays. Feminine speech uses polite, gentle, and refined styles referred to as “women’s language” (*onnakotoba* or *josēgo*) or “womanly ways of talking” (*onnarashiihanashikata*), which have been historically fashioned within intricate discourses on class, nation, and race (Inoue 2006: 279; Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith 2008a: 2).

The *onnakotoba* originates in the attempt to regulate women’s speech. Educational books for women in the Meiji era (1868-1912) repeated the lessons of the Muromachi (1392-1573) and Edo (1693-1868) eras, demanding that women do not speak too much and use simple, polite words and formulations –specific first-person pronouns (*atashi*, *atakushi*), sentence-final particles (*wa*, *dawa*, *no*, *yone*, *noyo*, *teyo*, *chatta...*), the honorific or “beautification” prefix (*o-*) and the like (Nakamura 2008: 33). And whereas the “school girl language” (*jogakuseikotoba*) sounded “strange,” “vulgar,” and “unpleasant to the ears” up to the 1890s, it was elevated in the early twentieth century to *onnakotoba*, by an ironic twist corresponding to the rise of consumer culture and notably the dissemination of novels, magazines and advertising (Inoue 2006: 98-106). At present *onnakotoba* is still taught to girls, along with newer additions and rules of politeness in some homes and schools, according to which they should speak quietly, non-assertively and in a high-pitched voice (Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith 2008b: 88). Predictably, some teenage girls challenge these dominant models of femininity. Thus the “high school gal language” (*ko-gyaru-go*), sensationalized in the media, attempts to resist and subvert predetermined gender roles (Endo 2008: 15-17; Bohn and Matsumoto 2008: 52, 72). In sum, the relations between gender and humor cannot be understood without scrutinizing the culturally produced gender of any language. In Japanese, gender differences can be more clearly located in morphology than in most European languages (Matsumoto 2004:

245). "Men's language" (*dansēgo*) dramatically contrasts with *josēgo*, with *onnakotoba*. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ide (2004: 181–182) observed that women's use of polite honorifics was not due to their subordinate position in society, but to their roles of housewives that involved much social interaction. More recently women's language, she asserts, has diversified. People belong to several "group languages" (*isō*) which overlap "so that women's language and Tokyo language and teachers' language all play a role in determining how a female teacher from Tokyo will express what she has to say". The next section attempts to show how, in practice, humor within the workplace is driven by linguistic strategies that get gender in trouble.

Japanese humor at work: toward staging gender

Both Freud (1960) and Bergson (2007) made the point that humor is a social, group phenomenon that calls for the participation of at least two and commonly three or more people, real or imaginary. And when people are at work, so is humor. Strategically toyed with, language offers opportunities for either reassertions or redefinitions of gender. Thus Bethel's (1992) study in the Aotani Institution for the Elderly introduces MrsOtake, a female member of staff who uses kin terms for their humorous value. Some of the residents she calls by their first names, adding the infantilizing suffix -*chan*. This suffix is usually heard in the family circle and reserved for children, but MrsOtake uses it "to point out a nonconforming resident for public ridicule, for example, during mealtime." She earns in return the affectionate name of "*Otake-chan*," which for Bethel proves that her funny habit has established relationships of enhanced intimacy. However one could allege that this verbal manipulation of age simultaneously consists in the symbolic removal of gender toward the sexless category of the child, the sexually immature or non-sexualized being. The case would then illustrate the power of staff over residents through language on the one hand, somewhere between gentle control and "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970); but also the more specific influence of humor on gender on the other. McLendon (1983: 173, 175) provides a related example in a large trading company. Men use the word "aunt" (*obasan*) in their native Kansai dialect (*obahan*) in order to enhance the sense of ridicule they want to express toward a minority of single women, whose age is older than what is regarded as marriageable. Other sarcastic terms are used in reference to this minority, such as "old maids" (*ikazugoke*). McLendon speaks of cruel humor and disdain, but again I had rather insist on the capacity of humorous language to deteriorate or suppress gender. As if these women did not deserve their appellation, as if they were not exactly or hardly women, such derisions erode their humanity.

Yoshida (2001) witnessed opposite dynamics in a Japanese inn (*ryokan*). Whilst in Japanese society men have greater social status and power than women, the men's work in running the *ryokan* was subordinate to that of women. In other words the organization of the *ryokan* replicated that of society, but turned inside out. Women joked more energetically than males, thereby expressing an alternative gender hierarchy and in particular the superiority of their role in providing hospitality. For guests expected a sense of Japaneseeness that females felt able to incarnate. Finding themselves marginal and the butts of jokes, men would quietly and humbly swallow their pride, when pride was precisely what the female inn workers conveyed about their work in their caustic remarks. An analogy between Yoshida's research in the *ryokan* and Bakhtin's (1968) classic *Rabelais and his World* can offer a useful transition to the second part of this chapter, which connects artistic masks to social masks, or the playful unreality of performances to the serious reality of life. Bakhtin saw the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as "carnivalesque". At the heart of the carnival was the idea of overturning reality in a "grotesque" burst of laughter that must have sounded very similar to that of the female inn workers. The related idea of *theatrum mundi*, of defining the essence of society through the metaphor of the theatre, may sound commonplace now (e.g. Boltanski 2007: 59-61). It featured in the satirical poetry of Ancient Greece and Rome, and in

Stoicism; it became fashionable again in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Shakespeare, Calderon, Cervantès), in the eighteenth century (Rousseau), and again in contemporary sociology (Goffman). “All the world’s a stage”, writes Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. Erving Goffman (1959) interprets people’s interactions as (theatrical) performances involving two main “teams”: the performers, and the audience. To address their audience, the performers use the front and back regions of the show. The audience appears only in the front region whilst outsiders are excluded from both regions. A parallel ought to be drawn in passing with the *omote/ura* (“front”/“back”) distinction and a set of similar dichotomies (e.g., *uchi/soto* in 1.2) that are essential for understanding Japanese culture and as such repeatedly mentioned in the anthropology of Japan (see Doi 1986, first and Lebra 1976: 112; Rosenberger 1992; Smith 1997: 45; Hendry 2003: 50; Sugimoto 2003: 28).

A paper can only be very limited in scope, which is why this one focuses on a specific type of stage. It is Japanese and comic on the one hand; and it is permeated with gender on the other. It could be suggested through a number of Japanese imitative and conversational arts that the intersection of humor and gender is a diverting locus where existence fuses with pretense, being with acting, our own experience with its collective representations. In this perspective, the classic feminist contention that gender is “acted out” in front of a participative male and female audience rings true enough for Goffman (1959: 50), who includes an incisive passage from Simone de Beauvoir’s (1986) *Second Sex*:

[T]he least sophisticated of women, once she is “dressed,” does not present herself to observation; she is, like the picture or the statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there – that is, the character she represents, but is not. It is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus to seem to herself to be stabilized, justified in her splendor.

By the same token, gendered language dresses women in ways which have been underlined above. Its humorous tones, from bluntly sexist stories to more subtle witticisms, barely conceal opinions about how women are really seen or imagined. It is in this sense that representations (plays, skits, concerts, the visual arts and so forth) are so crucial to scrutinize when it comes to gender relations. Jokes, puns and parodies fulfill under their derisory looks a very serious function. Huizinga (1970: 10) did not believe, for instance, that the commonsensical boundary between play and seriousness should be taken seriously. Humor as a form of mimetic or narrative play “creates order, is order ... Play demands order absolute and supreme.” For the game to exist, players by definition must stick to its rules. Humor is endowed with a creative force that generates order out of chaos.

Conclusion

The introduction referred to an *order*, a making of clear-cut categories through exaggeration of, say, male and female features to the detriment of more realist portrayals. Anthropologists like to emphasize in their accounts of rituals, folk tales and other playful forms this performative function of humor. Radcliffe-Brown (1965) studied joking relationships in a couple of African societies. And there are societies where certain kinship relations, for example between son-in-law and mother-in-law, have to be articulated through jokes (Le Goff 1997: 44). Anthropology does share with humor a function of defamiliarization: both disturb common sense, making the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 2, 74; Bourdieu 1993: 9–10; Driessen 1997: 224; Critchley 2002: 65). Further research could, in this light, analyze humor within Japanese performances.

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