

## Experimenting with Gender in Manga

by Kat Avila

*Warning: This review may contain spoilers.*

One reason *manga* (Japanese comics) - and *manhwa* (Korean comics) - can be an entertaining read is the comedy and drama of watching someone either successfully, or unsuccessfully, performing the opposite gender role. In Japan, the performative aspects of gender are made plain in the traditional all-male Kabuki where males play idealized females and in the modern all-female Takarazuka Revue Company where females play fantasy males.

Expressions of femininity ("I have a yin soul") or masculinity ("I have a yang soul"), a particular way of behaving and conducting oneself, are generally bonded to being a particular sex. Such iconic behaviors are intellectually created and culturally steeped, not necessarily instinctively seeded. Nevertheless, there remains considerable social and institutional pressure to maintain a biological sex-based gender system by laws (e.g., only heterosexual "men" and "women" can have legally recognized marriages), outward physical appearance, behaviors, occupation and leisure time interests. *Manga* provides a safe harbor for gender experimentation without the sex change operation.

*Manga* characters, and the reader vicariously, can find themselves on the other side of the line through gender role swapping via cross-dressing; biological sex and gender role swapping via magical transformations; and, in the debatable extreme, elimination of genitalia-defined gender markers via same-sex boy's love/*yaoi*. What follows is a small sampling of titles in each category. Native Japanese and Korean names are listed in this article according to Western convention (family name last); publishers may follow different conventions.

### Gender Role Swapping via Cross-dressing

Osamu Tezuka's *Princess Knight* (girl disguised as a prince) created in the early 1950s, Riyoko Ikeda's *The Rose of Versailles* (girl raised as a boy who becomes captain of the palace guard) in the 1970s, and Chiho Saito and Be Papas's *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (teenaged girl who chooses to act like a prince instead of a princess) in the 1990s fall into this category. These well-known works are pioneering from the viewpoint that the comic artists dared to cast females in lead fantasy roles traditionally occupied by biological males; at the same time, the artists were, knowingly or unknowingly, being subversive of prevailing strict patriarchal and heterosexual social norms. This is not so much the case with the titles listed below where gender role swapping via cross-dressing is more a part of the comic's architecture for forcefully throwing two people together to create a humorous romance; their content is indicative of what domestic publishers think American consumers will likely buy.

### Girl Got Game

by Shizuru Seino, English (c) 2003 TOKYOPOP

*Wait. I'm supposed to be a boy, right? Act like a boy.* - Kyo

Kyo's father never realized his dream of becoming a professional basketball player, so he expects Kyo to do it for him - by enrolling her as a guy at Seisyu High School, known for its outstanding basketball team. Playing basketball comes easy for Kyo. However, can she convince the star player, who is also her roommate, that she's just one of the guys? And where do you hide a menstrual napkin in a boys' dorm?

### Hani-Kimi: For You In Full Blossom

by Hisaya Nakajo, English (c) 2004 VIZ

*I'm a man...so I've got to accept!* - Mizuki, responding to Nakatsu's soccer challenge



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Track star Mizuki wants to be close to champion high jumper Izumi Sano, so she cuts her hair and dresses as a guy to attend his all-boys' high school. Cute Mizuki becomes the new school idol, and Nakatsu is starting to wonder if he's gay because he has a crush on her. But the charade can't last, especially when the gay school doctor - "I'm no stranger to cross-dressers" - picks up on her secret.

### ***Kill Me, Kiss Me*** (K2, in Korea)

by Young-Yuu Lee, English (c) 2004 TOKYOPOP

*I never knew boys could really be this brutal. Poor Jung-Woo. Does he have to put up with this macho crap all the time?* - Tae

There are two story arcs. In the first related story arc, tomboy Tae wants to trade places with her look-alike guy cousin Jung-Woo in order to meet boy model Kun Kang. It's only for one week. Tae goes to an all-girls' school and Jung-Woo's school is co-ed. On the first day, she gets beaten up by Kun's best friend who thinks Tae is Jung-Woo. Things aren't looking so good.



### ***Snow Drop***

by Kyung-Ah Choi, English (c) 2004 TOKYOPOP

*Why...am I so happy to see him...? Have I become a woman for real...?* - Ko-Mo, after being rescued by Ha-Da

Supporting characters Ko-Mo and Ha-Da are falling for each other. Will their budding romance stand a chance when playboy Ha-Da finds out the arrogant knockout Ko-Mo isn't Hae-Gi's sister - but his brother?!

### ***W Juliet***

by Emura, English (c) 2004 VIZ

*No matter what I look like on the outside, I'm a full-fledged, certified woman!* - Ito

The drama club's husky-voiced female president Ito is going to play Romeo in the cultural festival production of Romeo and Juliet. Now, who will play Juliet? Beautiful new transfer student Makoto seems like a shoe-in. Yet, would everyone still agree if they knew Makoto was actually a man? Makoto must prove to a stubborn father that he has the determination and talent to be an actor by passing as a female student for the next year and a half until his high school graduation.

### ***Biological Sex & Gender Role Swapping via Magical Transformations***

When I was trying to think of manga featuring biological females who turn into males, I could only think of the hermaphrodites in *hentai manga* (porn comics); body possessions, e.g., in Shiori Shiozu's *Eerie Queerie!*, Kiyomi's ghost borrows Mitsuo's body to be with the guy she has a crush on; and reincarnations, e.g., in Kaori Yuki's *Angel Sanctuary*, Setsuna was in a former life the powerful female angel Alexiel. Perhaps the reason why the sampling only reflects guys who turn into girls is that it may be too threatening in a patriarchal society to visualize a girl becoming muscular and sprouting a penis, whereas the reverse transformation is frequently comical.

### ***Cheeky Angel***

by Hiroyuki Nishimori, English (c) 2004 VIZ

*Girls DON'T fight boys!! They DON'T!!* - Miki to Megumi

Megumi has been a girl for six years, since he was nine years old and was handed a cursed book. The mischievous spirit of the book screwed up Megumi's single granted wish, which was to become "the manliest man among men in the whole wide world," changing it to "a woman among women." The usually spunky Megumi is about to learn how tough and awkward it is to be a girl when the guys at his new high school start falling hard for him, especially the school thug.

### **Les Bijoux**

by writer Eun-Ha Jo and artist Sang-Sun Park, English (c) 2004 TOKYOPOP

*What saves the world is neither power nor violence, but a balance of all things. That's why you were created both man and woman.* - Silica to Lapis

Lapis is the champion for the abused lower class. He'd like to avenge his parents' brutal deaths by killing Lord Diamond of Neige Mine, but his female personality Lazuli prevents him from doing so. It's a major problem because he transforms into her every time Diamond is in the vicinity.

### **Ranma 1/2**

by Rumiko Takahashi, English (c) 1994 Viz

*Prepare yourself, sissy-boy...! I won't leave Akane in the hands of a half-man like you!!* - Ryoga to female Ranma

Martial artist Ranma has a peculiar problem as a result of a plunge into an enchanted spring. Whenever he makes contact with water, he turns into a girl, which may or may not be worse than his romantic rival Ryoga's transformation into Akane's pet pig P-chan.

### **Tenshi ni Bara no Hanataba o** (Rose Bouquet for an Angel)

by writer Sakura Kai and artist You Higuri, (c) 2000 Asuka Comics DX (in Japanese only)

*My body...what on earth happened?!* - Sei, discovering he has womanly breasts

Happy 17th birthday, Sei! What a rude awakening! Sei is transformed into a girl - the White Maria - when he's around white roses and can only turn back into a boy when kissed by his male guardian Kyouya.

### **Vampire Game**

by Judal, English (c) 2003 Mixx Entertainment (TOKYOPOP)

*But one request. If you can only shapeshift into a boy, please don't use my face. You have no idea how much that weirds me out.* - Ishtar to Duzell

Vampire king Duzell has been reborn, but in this life he is the cat-like pet kyawl of his archenemy's great-granddaughter, the Lady Ishtar. Duzell wants to kill the reincarnation of St. Phelios, the king who killed Duzell in his past life. It shouldn't be too hard to get close to Phelios if he can change into Ishtar.

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