CHAPTER 6

THE AESTHETICS OF FEMALE-LIKENESS

Erotic Abstraction, Attraction, and Aversion

Certain aesthetic principles form the basis for the special miryoku (fascination) and beauty of onnagata gender acts. The major onnagata aesthetic principles are yōshikibi, the beauty of stylization; uso, the fiction or lie; aimai, ambiguity and transformativity; iroke, eroticism and sensuality; zankoku, torture; and kanashimi, deepening sorrow. Yōshiki (stylization), or the controlled design of all performance elements, is the fundamental strategy that governs the aesthetic canons for onnagata gender performance. Onnagata are aware of these principles and use them strategically to build a role’s central motif.

The aesthetic elements fundamental to the onnagata no bi (beauty of the onnagata) are complex and best illustrated in specific performance contexts. Aesthetic principles signal the workings of a hegemony and force certain questions to arise: how did/do certain gender acts get configured to produce a particular aesthetic? Have onnagata, through their performance of onnagata gender acts, created their own subversive aesthetics? Which aesthetics have become thematic to all onnagata gender roles? Which aesthetic elements permeate all onnagata gender acts?1 What or who do these aesthetic choices serve? The interdependence of onnagata aesthetics and onnagata gender acts reveals an underlying ideology that links violence and sensuality, sorrow and beauty to a female-like appearance. Further, the dominant thematic of gender aimai, that is, ambiguity and transformativity, destabilizes any set “gender identity.”

Onnagata perform their gender roles by intersecting their male bodies with their stylized onnagata acts, producing an unstable composite: a hybrid gender role. An analysis of the performance techniques that constitute the gender acts reveals the physical framework of the kabuki fiction of

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female-likeness. The examples, chosen by onnagata, illustrate the performative moments that best convey the *kankaku* (sensual perception) of onnagata gender performance.

**Designing Beauty and Charm**

*Kabuki no bigaku*, the study of kabuki beauty, or aesthetics of kabuki, revolves around an art of stylization that is at once flamboyant and wildly sensual, as well as subtly “natural” and painstakingly controlled. In kabuki, every element of performance must appear beautiful. As Baikō VII commented, “No matter what, in every action, an onnagata must show beauty.” To accomplish this, an onnagata performs within a completely stylized system of physical and vocal acts. Thus, even the most mundane tasks, like arranging sandals at the doorway, opening a sliding door, lighting a pipe, or placing a pillow, are stylized in space and time according to aesthetic codes.

The kabuki system of stylization applies to all onnagata gender acts. Onnagata articulate costuming, makeup, music, movement, song, dialogue, or narration to achieve beauty of presentation. Even emotions are shaped into aesthetic forms through stylized gestures, poses, and patterns of music, sounds, and vocalization. There are degrees of fervor and types of stylization appropriate to a role’s rank, age, and circumstances, as well as rules for role type categories, or *yakugara*. Above all, stylization through abstraction, elongation, diminution, repetition, or exaggeration, highlights form over content and meaning. For example, however evil, reviling, or disgusting a crime committed by a character, the performer makes that act beautiful through the particular stylization system of the kabuki stage. In a discussion of a violent scene, Brandon pinpoints the aim of kabuki’s art of stylization, “...to create a sense of beauty irrespective of subject matter. The extended murder scenes...may seem sordidly real, but in performance they are eerily beautiful. Delicately lyric music accompanies actions that are executed in artfully choreographed dance patterns.”

Gunji Masakatsu suggests in his book, *Kabuki no Bigaku* (Kabuki Aesthetics), that the aesthetics of kabuki are very mixed and not easily classified. Because kabuki is considered a classic and traditional form of theatre today does not mean kabuki aesthetics are related to other classic theatres like nō, which emphasizes refined and subtle aesthetics. In fact, kabuki aesthetics have little in common with theatre forms created before kabuki. Kabuki evolved from the sensual and sexual entertainments of the lower classes, erotic attractions of the human body, brutality, and a fascination with pain and evil. For Gunji, kabuki aesthetics have much more in common with contemporary avant-garde and experimental art and theatre.