

V. SEX AS “LAUGHTER”

Question 5. Today manga is famous around the world and its origins are thought to lie in ukiyo-e. Is there a connection between what is called “*hentai komikku*” (perverted or sexual comics) and *shunga*?

A. These days there are many comics around the world that depict sex, but as to the question of whether there is a connection between *hentai komikku* and ukiyo-e *shunga*, this probably arises because modern manga depicts genitalia in an exaggerated manner. I can see why many non-Japanese might think that there are similarities, but I am not knowledgeable enough about *hentai komikku* to be able to answer if there is direct influence. If I were to offer an hypothesis, I would say that there is likely to be some influence in the depiction of genitalia, but that the essential element of *warai* (laughter) in *shunga* is completely different from the “comic” in *hentai komikku*.

The “laughter” in ukiyo-e *shunga*, as we can see from examples already considered, is found not in fantasy worlds but in the representations of what can be imagined as the realities of everyday commoners’ lives. Here we see the laughter of their intimate experiences. *Shunga* can be seen as an extension of the popular storytelling art of *rakugo*, which has many tales about the romantic foibles of city folk. In contrast, *hentai komikku* developed from the same perspective of modern Western pornography in which the view of sex is distorted and not natural. The use of the word “comic” refers less to humor and more to the style of drawing in comics.

We have seen that one term for *shunga* was “*warai-e*” (laughter pictures). *Warai-e* can mean the representation of peoples’ sexual lives humorously or satirically, which makes sense, but we see in *shunga* the explicit depiction of sexual lives and the focus of the laughter is presented raw and graphically. We can say that in the Edo period people viewed sexuality itself as something to laugh at or enjoy. The sex toys such as dildos for women and the *azuma-gata* (pouch-like object) for men in the Edo period were all called *warai-dōgu* (laughter sex toys), and we can see that they saw a direct connection between sex and laughter.

Furthermore, we see in Japanese festivals even today examples of giant representations of male and female genitalia that are placed on floats and paraded through villages and towns, drawing laughter from the spectators. There are also examples of folk festivals where dancers hold a giant phallus in a comic performance. The laughter is not due to the taboo on sex. The laughter invites happiness in the community. There is a famous incident in ancient Japanese mythology when the Sun Goddess Amaterasu hid herself in a cave making the world dark. The female deity Amanouzume no Mikoto danced and stripped to her privates, and all the assembled gods laughed aloud. This caused

Amaterasu to come out again and return light to the world. We can see that sex and laughter are linked from the earliest times of Japanese culture, and that this follows in a long tradition of laughter as a catalyst for health and happiness. We can see, therefore, why *warai-e* was another term for *shunga* in the Edo period.

Among Japanese people there are some who will snigger when they see *shunga*, but virtually no one will be angered by them. However, the idea that sex is fun or should elicit laughter is not a universal phenomenon. In the world there are many societies where sex is viewed as a taboo or “original sin.” There are other examples where sex is viewed as the foundation of all life and worshipped religiously. Japan’s traditional culture is in this latter camp. Nevertheless, it is not that sex itself is worshipped, rather we see an affirmation of human sexual desire as natural, and this is accompanied by pleasurable mirth.

It is common that humor is considered base and low, but the Edo period seems to revel in the pleasures of laughter and considered it essential. Of course there is plenty of vulgar and derisive humor, but the laughter that we find in ukiyo-e *shunga* holds up everyone as equal objects of fun, and the focus goes around and around back to the viewer as well, as we laugh at ourselves and the foibles of humanity. It is here that we see the long tradition of considering sex and *warai*, fun, laughter, and pleasure, and its effectiveness in softening the human tendency to be formal and stiff, and in controlling powerful and often overwhelming sexual desires. It is very important for us today to treasure this view of sex found in ukiyo-e *shunga*.

We have seen the manifestation of humor in the many ukiyo-e *shunga* discussed above. There are various kinds of humor and so let us consider some particular examples.

21. *Shikidō tokkumi jūnitsugai* 色道取組十二番

(Twelve Couplings of the Way of Love) (image 12)

Isoda Koryūsai (ac. 1764–1789). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1777.

In a public bathhouse a small child points to the erect penis of a young man and laughs. This image of the young man with an aroused penis is certainly comical, and represents a kind of simple, innocent laughter understandable throughout the ages.

In Japan the public bathhouses did not traditionally have separate male and female baths. In Edo Japan, mixed bathing was the norm. However, it was customary for a woman to wear a thin robe and a man to cover his privates with a *fundoshi* cloth, a kind of underwear, but in the large communal bathtub itself, it was common that individuals were naked. In 1791 mixed bathing was made illegal in Edo but this was aimed not so much at mixed bathing, but at the sex trade among *yuna*, who were employed at bathhouses to help customers. It was not until the Meiji era that mixed bathing was outlawed in public bathhouses.

In the Edo period most commoner homes did not have a private bath, so people commuted regularly to the public bathhouse. Children might there have witnessed hanky-panky among the customers and learned about sex.



Figure 21

22. *Fūryū enshoku Mane'emon* 風流艶色真似ゑもん
(Mane'emon's Erotic Adventures) (image 6)

Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770). Set of twenty-four *chūban* color woodblock prints. 1770.

We have previously seen episodes of the Bean Man Mane'emon. Here the text says, “Happened upon a ‘new field’ being plowed, and had to laugh at the trick.” As we see in the image, an older farmer couple and their daughter are planting rice. A man with a strange mask and a sword at his waist appears and approaches the young woman from behind with lascivious intentions. The masked man’s words are:

Masked man: “Very nice! Excellent! I am the night hawk god of Inari Shrine. If you give your daughter to me, I’ll see that your fields will yield a hundred fold more, even if you do not till them.”



Figure 22

We can see that the scary mask of the man is the trickery of a confidence man who is claiming to be a messenger of the Inari deity. The word night hawk “*yogarasu*” can also mean to give a woman sexual pleasure. It is relatively easy to pun in Japanese and here we witness both visual and aural humor. His name sounds suspicious, but the farmers seem to believe him.

Farmer wife: “Oh, how scary!”

Farmer husband: “How grateful we are oh great *yogarasu* god. Not just daughter, I’ll give you my wife as well, if it so pleases Inari.”

If his crop will increase a hundred-fold, then he will happily hand over both women. We cannot help but laugh at his ridiculous foolishness led by greed. The masked man replies to this as he departs.

Masked man: “That’s marvelous, marvelous! I’ll be back again tomorrow.”

This too is full of wordplay. “*Yoki ka na*” (good, marvelous) of course refers both to agreeing to the man’s request for a bumper crop and to how nice it was to have sex with his daughter. The phrase “*kon, kon,*” which means to come again, also suggests the cry of the fox, which is the well known messenger of the Inari deity. The text is like a comedy sketch in traditional *rakugo*.

We notice Mane’emon resting in the shade of a tree on the side of the road. He comments on the comic simplicity of countryfolk.

Mane’emon: “This is really a rare carnal sight, truly a lesson in the foolishness of rustic folk.”

We can hear the smugness of Edo folk towards their country cousins. To be sure, the country folk look silly falling for the conman, and we are expected to laugh at this. However, when we look carefully at this picture, we see that it is not only a ridiculous scene, but also has the mood of an ancient folktale. There is a long tradition in Japan of sex being a part of the songs in festivals that pray for a bountiful harvest. Sexual fertility and pregnancy are analogous to a bountiful harvest. Such beliefs gradually come to be considered only superstition, but even after one views such beliefs coldly with reason, can we imagine that deep in our consciousness associations of fertility, between crops and procreation, still remain? Perhaps we should see that this image is not just poking fun at rustics but also a clever joke that laughs warmly at the tradition of what is in English as well as a mixing of metaphors of sexuality and plowing fields.

23. *Iro jigoku sōshi emaki* 色地獄草紙絵巻 (Picture Scroll of Carnal Hell)

Artist unknown. Color on paper. Ca. early 19th century.

Jigoku sōshi (Tales of Hell) is a famous picture scroll dating from the twelfth century. Based on Buddhist principles it depicts the pain and punishments of those who have been cast into hell after evil lives. This picture scroll is a parody of the traditional painting, focusing on the travels of a lascivious couple through the realms of hell.

In the image here we see a couple before Lord Enma who judges the dead. A characteristic of this scroll is that each scene has a *kyōka* comic poem. Enma’s poem:

Seeing a couple still clinging / after death / Enma himself / is jealous

Here the humor is that Enma, who is usually severe on those who have too much lust, is envious of the warmly intimate couple.



Figure 23-1



Figure 23-2

Enma is served by a Blue (Green) Demon and a Red Demon, who are attached together. They too are jealous of the couple. Their poem is:

Demons Green and Red love sex / like this couple / that's why our bodies / are colored green and red

In Japanese, the word for color *iro* has also the meaning of carnal desire. The poem of Enma's secretary is:

Even for the secretary of Enma's judgments / who records human sins / there's no way / to understand carnal desire / by reason alone

The recorder of human sins looks into the mirror at his side that reflects the entire life of the deceased and sees them in passionate embrace. The humor is, then, seeing that his kimono has lifted because of his erection.

This image may reflect attitudes towards sexual desire not only of Edo folk, but of the Japanese today. Enma's envy at the passionate couple perhaps reflects Japanese Buddhism, where it is common now for priests to marry. The couple travel through hell and at the end are led by Amida Buddha and are reborn in Paradise. Amida and his companions Kannon and Seishi guide the couple to Paradise, but we see here that their faces have been transformed into a penis and vulvas, definitely an Edo witty transformation.

24. *Ehon tsui no hinagata* 絵本つひの雛形

(Picture Book: Patterns of Couplings) (image 11)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1812.

On a summer eve a couple doze off content. We saw a similar scene in Figure 12 but here Hokusai adds a twist. He has a cat comment in length on the love life of his master. Further, we see a pair of mice going at it after getting excited by the couple. It is in the cat's commentary that we find the humor.

Husband and Wife: "Zz. Zz."

Cat: "From long ago cats are known to have egg-shaped eyes. Around six in the evening they grow round, and at midnight they narrow like a needle. Human eyes, too, seem to change. The master here says, 'Wife, time to get up,' and tries to arouse her, and has her grab his erect cock. Whereupon, the wife wakes up and her eyes grow round, and she leads him inside twice, three times, and then her eyes narrow into an egg shape. 'Ah, good, good! I'm coming,' she says and then her eyes narrow like a needle. If a woman comes nine times, then her pubic hairs stand up like a torch. It is intriguing that even in pitch darkness they somehow manage not to mistake the anus for the vulva when inserting his rod. Ah, don't feel so well. The master is going at it again! Maybe, I'll catch a mouse or two. On my! The mice have begun as well. I guess it would be a 'sophisticate' who would let the mice alone to have their fun. What a bore for me."

The text notes the orgasmic cries of the mice, *chū, chū, chū*. What a smug cat! Of course, this is a rhetorical technique we often see in ukiyo-e *shunga* of using small animals for humorous effect.



Figure 24

One further element of this image is the *senryū* comic haiku on the fan: “Benkei and Komachi / are fools / don’t you agree, wife.” In legend the famous twelfth-century warrior Benkei was thought to dislike women, and the ninth-century beautiful poet Komachi was thought to hate men. Both are said to have avoided heterosexual encounters throughout their lives. So, we see here that the poem shows the pleasures of conjugal sex among commoners, and the image shows them contentedly dozing off.

**25. *Fūryū enshoku Mane’emon* 風流艶色真似及もん
(Mane’emon’s Erotic Adventures) (image 4)**

Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770). Set of twenty-four *chūban* color woodblock prints. 1770.

We can see from a glance that this image depicts a wife interrupting her husband’s affair with another woman. The wife with her red underskirt and *obi* tied around her middle is pregnant. She holds a candle in her right hand and grabs the underpants of her husband, pulling him back into the adjacent room. The dialogue is:



Figure 25

Wife: “This woman with my husband is that daughter, the girl that just came. Tomorrow I’ll complain to Jirō about her. But if I tell Jirō about it, then how can I explain what happened? Oh, you lecherous man! You can find time for a tryst, but no time to help me. I’m mad as hell.”

Her words tell us that the girl is the daughter of “Jirō,” most likely a relative who has come to stay to help with her pregnancy. We can understand her anger and frustration. She wants to complain to the girl’s parents but the real culprit is her husband, and so the blame will bounce back on them. Her anger then turns on her husband, and she curses and calls him a “lecher.”

The husband looks wretched as he begs forgiveness, “Please, I beg you.” He is being dragged by his underpants and his offending penis is hanging out. We cannot help but laugh at his pitiful situation.

The girl is embarrassed and hides her face with her sleeve, but she responds to the wife's screams.

Girl: “Ma'm, Auntie, it is all my fault. Please forgive me. They'll hear next door.”

Caught *in flagrante delicto*, the pair are chastised by the anger of the wife, each tense as if in battle, but seen from outside, we can only laugh at this farce, which expresses a universal aspect of the foibles of human sexuality.

26. *Ehon jinkōki* 会本腎強喜 (**Picture Book: Joys of Ejaculation**) (vol. 1, image 8) Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1789.

The image shows an orgy. We wonder if it is a wild affair centered on a young widow. The woman is being taken by a young apprentice actor (*kageko*), who in turn is being bugged by an *onnagata* actor, who is being taken from behind by another man; and finally we see that the pet dog too is getting in on the act. We can see that *warai-e* has taken flight into the realms of fantasy.

The last man says to the *onnagata*: “I'll call out the beat; if we don't thrust in rhythm, my dick will slip out.” The man barks orders. The *onnagata* bothered, looks



Figure 26

back at him and says, “Hey, fairy boy (*kappa*), quiet back there. It hurts!” The apprentice actor stays quiet and the young widow swoons in pleasure unconcerned at their antics, “Ah, more! Fantastic!”

Finally, the dog has his say: “Seeing all this, can’t hold back any longer. I’ll have a go at this fairy boy. Fairy boy, you need to clean a bit of shit off. Your arse is always dirty. Wow, wow, wow!” We are left with the stark image of the dog having his pleasure, and thereby stealing the show.

27. *Ehon jinkōki* 会本腎強喜 (Picture Book: Joys of Ejaculation) (vol. 2, image 4)
Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1789.

This image shows a single man taking an afternoon nap in a tenement house in Edo and dreaming. We wonder what he is imagining. Let’s listen to his mumbling:

Sleeping man: “I’d want a wife who was like the girl next door. Zz, zz. Even better if she was from a tofu shop. Zz, zz. I never knew that you’ve fallen for me. Do you fancy me? I love you. No one’s around, so let’s first smooch a bit. Your lips taste so good. If this is your first time, it might hurt, so be ready. I’m coming in. Oh, my! Something is biting my dick!”



Figure 27

We need some more explanation. The fellow’s mouth is half open as he sleeps, his face slovenly. His exposed lower parts reflect the passion in his dream. It is not surprising that his cock feels funny. We see two mice clinging on to his erection.

White mouse: “This is a thick one. It is five times the width of my two hands together. Wow, wow.”

Black mouse: “Come up here. There’s semen dribbling out and it slippery.”

These dialogues are entirely a device to elicit laughter. The technique is further developed, when we notice the two neighborhood wives peeking in.

Wife One: “My, my what a sight! Mr. Itogen must be having an interesting dream. He’s really talking in his sleep.”

Wife Two: “He’s certainly got a nice big one. It looks to be as big as the famous cock of Mr. Kashirō.”

Itogen is being viewed as if an act in freak sideshow. We expect that the fellow will any moment wake up finding the mice chewing on his dick. In *shunga* it is almost always the men who are the butt of the jokes.