

IX. PRECOCIOUS CHILDREN

Question 9. In *shunga* we see both young children and adolescents. Are they ever the objects of sexual activity? If not, what is the significance of their appearance?

A. We do find many examples of children in *shunga*. The main theme of *shunga*, of course, is sex between men and women, and we have seen how exaggerated is the explicit representation of genitals. But it is perhaps not widely known that children appear in *shunga*. The children are not, however, the objects of sexual activity, nor are they central to the theme or representing a particular motif. In general, whether in the West or East, it is unusual to include children in erotic images, and the inclusion of children in *shunga* may point to a particular characteristic of *shunga*.

Although children appear regularly in *shunga*, even if we imagine the Edo period as a more relaxed era toward sex, I have never read anything to suggest that in fact children were often present during sex. Then, why do they appear in *shunga*? One reason we might consider is that from ancient times in Japan, the taboo against sexual intercourse was very weak, and therefore there might not have been as strong a consciousness that it was necessary to keep children away. Another consideration is the openness of Japanese home architecture, offering little privacy and allowing children to roam more freely.

Another reason could be that as we have seen, another name for *shunga* was “laughter pictures” or “laughter books,” and that the element of humor was important. Therefore the reactions of children to sex as uninterested, innocent, confused, or mischievous brought wit and humor into the work. Should we look at it as a rhetorical technique?

Although modern Japanese may see nothing unusual in many aspects of the scenes of sexual activity, outsiders may regard some of them as strange, and the inclusion of children is likely to be a case in point. Most Japanese will look at a *shunga* image and get a general sense of what is going on, and imagine that it is possible, even if fantasy, and not be troubled by it, considering it to be a clever bit of humor. However, there are other cultures which might view this as offensive. In particular, in the contemporary West, the inclusion of children in sex scenes conjures up ideas of sexual abuse and makes viewers feel uncomfortable. Even in the West, which is freer in being able to exhibit *shunga*, images including children are kept from view. This does seem to show a different view of sex and its relation to childhood.

The range of children is broad, from suckling babies to boys and girls of puberty age. If we were to divide the roles that children play in *shunga*, we find the following three kinds:

One: Babies less than two, who are unaware of what is going on. They do not take part in any way and perhaps present the atmosphere of “a peaceful and happy household.” This is more common in early *shunga*.

Two: Children from ages three to six, who have some sense of what is going on and are interesting in exploring. Their misunderstandings are often the trigger for the humor, so in some respects they are like little clown characters. The inclusion of such children is common in *shunga* datable to the early and mid-Edo eras.

Three: Children ranging in age from seven to eleven are presented as generally understanding what is going on and are often mischievous. They appear particularly from mid-to-late-Edo period, and even are occasionally the protagonist. It was usually around the age of twelve that children were expected to begin working as apprentices.

However, we do see children of about twelve or thirteen without pubic hair who are beginning to experiment with sex. Since marriage age was as early as fifteen or sixteen, perhaps such representation was not entirely fictional. These kinds of activities for the various age groups seem to have been considered normal for the time period, and artists were most likely following these attitudes when including children in *shunga*. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards these categories are maintained, but often we see a technique where there is some kind of fissure between the child’s age and their activity that is meant to trigger laughter. In summary, we can say that for the most part children appear to add a touch of humor and lightness to a *shunga* scene, fulfilling one function of this genre called “laughter pictures.”

56. *Untitled Series*

Sugimura Jihei (ac. 1673–1704). Set of twelve *aiban* ink woodblock prints with hand coloring. Ca. 1685.

Parents with a baby who is suckling as the husband enters from behind. The text states:

A very sexy woman gets married and the couple become intimate immediately, vowing their love, and soon a baby is born. This makes her husband love her even more, and they make love every night. One early evening the husband wants to make love again and starts foreplay as soon as they get in bed, but the baby has woken up. The wife says she will feed him and they can begin after he is asleep but the husband cannot wait that long and holds her from behind. He tries to enter and she is already moist, just as flowing wet as the milk from her breast.

Here we see an early example often found in *shunga* showing the wife nursing the baby and the husband unable to wait. The simplemindedness of the husband in his inability to wait and the image of the couple having sex make us smile.

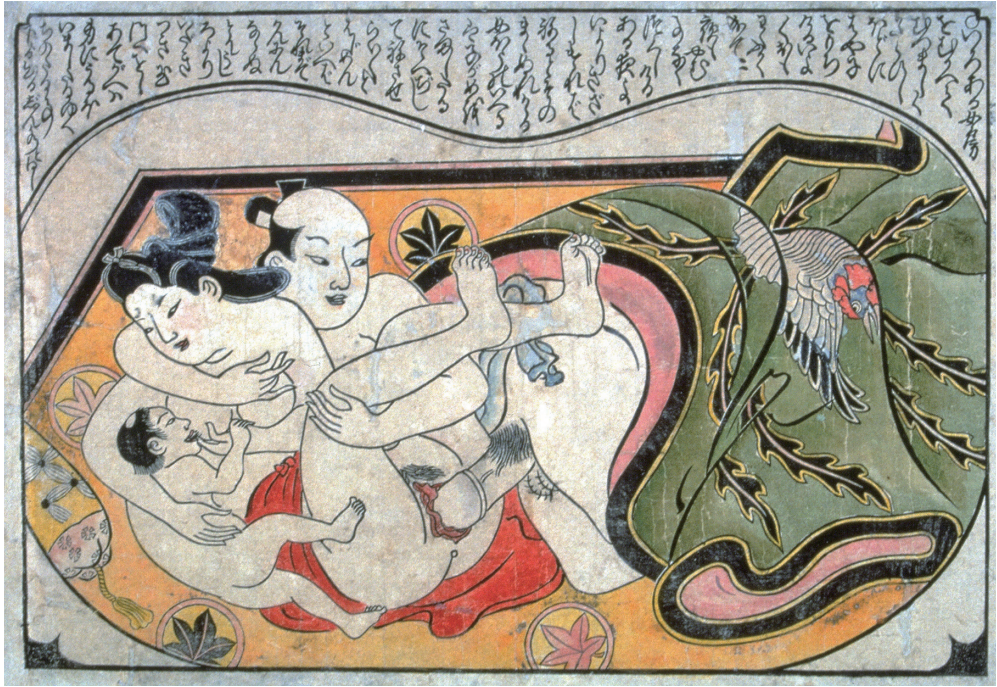


Figure 56

57. *Ehon midaregami* 絵本美多礼賀見 (**Picture Book: Tangled Hair**) (vol. 3, image 5) Keisai Eisen (1790–1848). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1815.

Similar to the previous image, a small family of parents and child are depicted. The boy wakes wanting milk from his mother, and at the same time the father's little fellow (penis) wakes up as well. The child is reaching out for the mother's breast, but he is of course uninvolved in the parent's actions.

Husband: "Mother, time to get up. The little fellow has woken up. Look, look, my little boy has woken as well. Wife, time to wake up."

Wife: "Umm, mmm, what! What is the boy up? Then I'll feed him."

Husband: "Look, my little fellow is up and ready too. While you're nursing him, turn your back to me. I'll come in from behind. Open your thighs up."

Wife: "Now, quiet down. I'll first put him to sleep again. I'll then face you. When you come from behind, it's not as good for me. Now, now, rubbing me with the tip is making me excited. If you're coming in, then make a good thrust. Ah, ah...."

Husband: "Earlier tonight, I was looking at a *shunga* book showing techniques and am horny as hell."



Figure 57

Near their pillow we see a book that might be *shunga*. Whatever the reasoning, it is interesting that we have such a similar situation and dialogue between a couple with a child, and wonder if it is a universal sentiment. It is a bit strange that the baby's little penis seems to be stiff like the father's. This was an innovation in late ukiyo-e.

58. Fukujusō 富久寿楚字 (Adonis Plant) (image 1)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1815.

The image shows a young boy who is being held by his mother. The key to understanding the image is in the text:

Mother: “The best is a dark cock; second is one with a full head; third is a white one; fourth is one that bends up; fifth is a soft fat one; sixth is a thick one; seventh,



Figure 58

long; eighth, narrow; ninth is bent; tenth is with foreskin covered. They say there's definitely a pecking order of peckers. His is dark, big head, thick bodied, and even better is that no matter how much we do it, it remains firm. It's a perfect penis specimen. This must be due to my devotion to Shinto and Buddhist deities from my youth. How many times did I come last night—can't remember. Just thinking about it makes me feel funny inside. Tonight I hope I can have such a time again.”

Boy: “Mommy, when I get big too, I want to do things like you and Dad were doing last night, so can you teach me about sex.”

Mother: “Wha, what's the little fellow on about! What a precocious thing to say! Ha, ha, ha.”

The mother is talking to herself as she remembers love-making the night before, not realizing that the child would understand, and is flabbergasted by his precocious response.

59. *Fūryū sandai makura* 風流三代枕

(Elegant Pillows: Three Generations) (vol. 2, image 4)

Kikukawa Hidenobu (ac. 1764–1781). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 5 vols. 1765.

After dinner, in front of the kitchen stove, a couple relax, and while trying to distract the child, the husband tries to entice his wife.

Husband: “Ah what a wonderful cunt. It’s already wet and slippery!”

Wife: “That’s because you let me handle your big firm piece. I can’t help myself. Hurry up and come inside.”

Although they seem proper and modest, the playful scene makes the reader feel the warmth of their intimacy.



Figure 59

60. *Danjo aishō wagō no en* 男女相性和娛縁

(Compatibility between Men and Women to Make Good Couples) (image 7)

Hishikawa Moronobu (d. 1694). Ink woodblock printed *ōhon* book. 1678.

In this image we can see three children. One is interfering with the couple. Let's see what the text says:

An impetuous husband started a session with his wife in daylight but a child happened to come in and the father acted like a demon to scare him off. However, since this often happened, the child was no longer afraid and asked his nurse to let him see what the demon did.

This is certainly a simple, funny tale. We can see in the image how the child is no longer afraid of the “demon” and that the nurse is trying to take the children away from the scene. Scenes like this one in *shunga* present conjugal relations as essentially private and hidden but not so that people were rigid about keeping themselves from being seen. The act of trying to scare the child away, of making love behind a folding screen—we would have to say that such efforts to keep sex hidden were only haphazard and not that serious.



Figure 60

**61. *Fūryū jūniki no eiga* 風流十二季の栄花
(Sexual Flowering over Twelve Months) (image 7)**

Isoda Koryūsai (ac. 1764–1789). Set of twelve *chūban* color woodblock prints. 1773.

The whole family is together on Tanabata festival night (seventh day of the seventh month), when offerings of poems are made to the stars in the hope of a child becoming skillful in calligraphy and weaving. A poem card is attached to bamboo leaves. The scene is the writing of the wishes. As this family event is taking place, the father has playfully entered the mother from behind. In reality this may not have been possible but the context is “laughter pictures” and the world of play. The scene perhaps represents one extreme of the fantasy of sexual love.

The mother says, “Now, what shall I put for the line below.” The father answers jokingly, “The lower line is ‘warmly, warmly’ . . .” The mother then answers, “Yes, yes, more, more. . .” This of course is referring to the line below. The boy says, “Mother, I want to look at yours and write mine.” He seems blissfully unaware of his parent’s sexual banter and activity.



Figure 61

62. *Ehon hime hajime* 会本妃女始

(First Intercourse of the New Year) (vol. 3, image 4)

Kitagawa Utamaro and Katsukawa Shunchō. Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1790.

The elder daughter in the house finds a way to sneak in her lover and they are enjoying themselves when her younger brother discovers them. He doesn't understand what is going on and thinks his sister is being hurt, and so grabs the hair of the man, trying to pull him off as hard as he can.

Boy: "Why are you sticking your dick into my sister's belly. You thief! Mother! Sister is being drilled by a dick."

Sister: "Brother, it's not true that I'm being attacked. When I said, 'I'm dying,' I didn't mean it. This man is giving me a massage, so please stop fighting. This is the best part of the massage."



Figure 62

The brother had misunderstood “I’m dying, dying” and tried to save his sister. His intensity creates a humorous scene, and the sister’s reaction carries the joke further.

63. *Imayō tsuma kagami* 今様妻鑑 (Mirror for Modern Wives) (vol. 1, image 10)
 Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1771.

On the Tanabata festival eve we see a youth and young girl upstairs on a veranda for hanging clothes out, and from across the way a girl and her younger brother plan some mischief.

Youth: “You look just like the geisha Otowa in Miyagawa-chō.”

Girl: “Hurry and come in.”

.....

Older sister: “Over there, look! See that young actor from Kyoto. He’s taking advantage of Omi. Let’s shoot them with a water pistol.”

Brother: “Great idea. Let’s do it.”

Older sister: “I wonder if the *onnagata* actor is home tonight.”

From the text, we can see that the house to the right is where an *onnagata* actor from Edo lives. He is most likely hosting a young actor from Kyoto or Osaka who has come

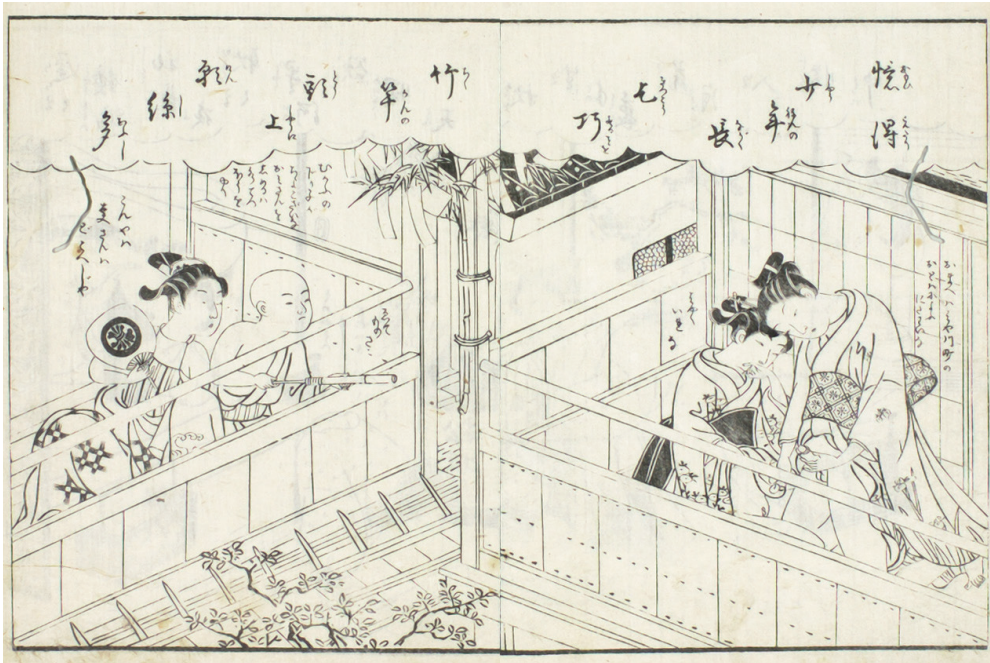


Figure 63

to work in Edo. The youth is an actor from Kyoto and the girl the daughter of the house. Both are presented as pre-puberty and without pubic hair, so the image is of precocious children.

The girl voyeur on the left suggests to her brother firing a water pistol at them, and he immediately agrees, getting it ready to fire. All the children seem to know what is going on. It is common for scenes of the Tanabata festival to feature children since it is an event focused on youth.

The Tanabata festival aims to promote children's skills such as poetry and calligraphy; here the "skill" is something the children seem to learn naturally. At least as represented in this image, we get a sense of the precociousness of urban adolescents, and it most likely reflects reality to a certain degree. Comparing these pictures with others thus far, we would consider the children to be around twelve or thirteen. At that time it was common to get married at fifteen or sixteen, and so it is likely that this would not have seemed to readers at that time to be entirely fantastical.

64. *Untitled* (images 5, 11)

Isoda Koryūsai (ac. 1764–1789). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1776.



Figure 64-1

From behind the sliding door a boy holds a rope made of iris leaves and watches a youth and a girl going at it. The boy says:

Boy: “Oh, oh! He’s sticking his dick in her. I’ll tell Mommy.”

Although the boy is still little enough to play with the iris-leaf rope, he seems already aware of the secret of the birds and the bees. His sister hears him, “Oh, no. I hear my little brother’s voice. Let’s take a break for a minute.” The youth, however, replies, “No worries. I’m ready to come,” unable to stop. The image and text tell us that the daughter is secretly having sex with the youth and her brother has discovered them.

Another scene from the same series has a five-year-old brother stick out his tongue and say: “Oh, oh. The man next door has mounted Sis!”



Figure 64-2

65. *Aya no odamaki* 綾の芋環 (A Ball of Damask Thread) (“uta” [“song”] image)
Terasawa Masatsugu (d. 1790). Ink woodblock printed *kohon* book. Ca. 1776.

A son of the family returns home late at night singing a song. In the next room his parents are already in bed. His mother scolds him. The father says:

Father: “He’s begun to be a bit wild. When a boy gets about that age, it’s only natural that he’s interested in sex.”

Mother: “Listen, Sukeshirō, it’s way too late for singing and playing around. Hurry to bed.”

.....

Sukeshirō: “Mother talks like that, but after you put me to sleep, I’m sure you will have a nice little festival with Dad.”

The father is sympathetic and understands the adolescent’s feelings. The youth already realizes why his mother wants him to go to sleep soon.



Figure 65