

The “Monstrous Feminine” in the work of Sakamoto Shin’ichi

坂本眞一の作品における 「モンスター・フェミニン」

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis and discussion of representations of the “monstrous feminine” in the work of seinen manga artist Sakamoto Shin’ichi, as well as how these representations subvert the conventions of the seinen manga genre. Sakamoto debuted in 1990 with Shūeisha’s JUMP label, and having drawn heavily muscled characters until the 1990s, entering the 2000s both his art style as well as his story-telling evolve rapidly. Sakamoto became a best-selling author when he created the manga version of Nitta Jirō’s novel *The Climber*, and for this work he won the 14th Japan Media Arts Festival Prize of Excellence in the manga category (2010). His next series, *Innocent*, is a fictionalized biography of France’s most famous executioner, Charles-Henri Sanson, and it gained Sakamoto worldwide popularity. In his oeuvre, representations of the monstrous feminine and their subversion of seinen manga conventions are most prevalent in *Innocent* and its sequel, *Innocent Rouge*, the two series I will focus on in this chapter.

Keywords : Manga studies, Monstrous feminine, Femininity, Monsters, Innocent

概 要

本稿では、青年漫画家 / 坂本眞一の作品における「モンスター・フェミニン」の表象、そしてその表象による青年漫画の約束事の攪乱を分析・考察していく。坂本は1990年に『週刊少年ジャンプ』（集英社）でデビューし、1990年代は主に筋骨隆々とした主人公を描いてきたが、2000年代に入ると画風とともに物語も成長し、新田次郎原作『孤高の人』の漫画化を手がけることによって広く注目を浴びるようになった。2010年同作品が第14回文化庁メディア芸術祭でマンガ部門優秀賞を受賞してから、革命時代のフランスの処刑人、シャルル・アンリ・サンソン（Charles-Henri Sanson）の生涯に基づく『イノサン』（Innocent）という作品で世界中に知られるようになる。「モンスター・フェミニン」の表象は主に『イノサン』と続編の『イノサン Rouge』で描かれ、青年マンガの約束事を覆した。本稿ではこの2つのシリーズに注目する。

キーワード：マンガ研究、モンスター・フェミニン、女性性、怪物、イノサン

Introduction

This paper¹⁾ is an analysis and discussion of the “monstrous feminine” (see part 2) in the work of manga artist Sakamoto Shin’ichi. Sakamoto has been active in the shōnen (少年, manga for boys) and seinen (青年) manga genres since 1990, and now enjoys worldwide popularity. The seinen genre is aimed at a readership of young men, not as popular or well-known globally as the shōnen and shōjo (少女, manga for girls) genres, and is regarded as often fairly misogynist because of its objectification of female characters in many series (as well as featuring young women wearing only bikinis—gravure idols—on the covers of many issues of seinen manga magazines).

Sakamoto’s current and most popular series however, uses the trope of the monstrous feminine to subvert the misogynist aspects of seinen manga, and it is a very timely development, as recent manga magazines reader surveys show that over half of the readership of shōnen as well as seinen manga is now female.²⁾ Traditional manga genre names no longer represent the genre of the readership/consumers of manga magazines, but that of the main characters of the narratives (Bauwens-Sugimoto, 2016: 115). Sakamoto adds another layer to the shifting of gendered genres and readerships: while the main character of his two most recent, and so far most successful series, is male, his role as protagonist became precarious throughout the first part of the series, and by the end of it is thoroughly usurped by his fictional sister, who represents his monstrous side. In another transgression, or characteristic of the monstrous female, she usurps his role in the narrative and obliterates him when it comes to generating reader interest. Sakamoto does not merely cater to a female readership the way many of his contemporaries in the shōnen and seinen genres do by drawing in a style and using a color palette more appealing to female readers (Ibid., 116), he created a character in which the monstrous isn’t othered, but on the contrary celebrated and embraced by readers, male and female alike, and a target of reader identification.

In part one of this paper I will discuss Sakamoto’s trajectory as an artist, in part two the monstrous feminine in his works, and building on that, in part three, his subversive monstrous female character, and the most popular character he has created to date: Marie-Joseph Sanson. Analysis and discussion will be based on a close reading of Sakamoto’s two current series, combined with theoretical concepts by Creed, Kristeva, Haraway, Genette, and Longhurst.

1. Sakamoto’s evolution as a manga artist

Sakamoto Shin’ichi (b. 1972, Ōsaka) is a seinen manga artist who debuted with Shūeisha (owner of the JUMP label with the number one best-selling manga magazine *Shōnen Jump*, and most prominent manga publisher in Japan) in the early nineties.³⁾ His earlier art work had a markedly hypermasculine slant, with main characters bulky with muscle present throughout all of his works. However, in spite of their heavily muscled physique, the faces of these characters were visually often oddly mismatched with their bodies; where other heavily muscled superheroes have faces to match, with exaggerated jaws and large brow bones, many of Sakamoto’s heroes have finely featured, narrow faces that are androgynously pretty rather than handsome in a masculine way. Male bodies in Sakamoto’s earlier work were coded decidedly masculine while their faces were often not.

In the early 2000s, over a decade after his debut, Sakamoto’s art style matured and evolved. His last work with male characters that seem to suffer from muscular hypertrophy is the comical series *Masuraō*

(益荒王),⁴⁾ the tale of a high school student who has anxiety about his overly well-endowed genitalia and who is afraid that his size makes him too intimidating to ever find a girlfriend. Because of this he, or what is in his pants, is regularly described as a monster. To remedy his predicament, he turns to a novel approach (within the genre): he treats all female characters with the utmost respect, without expecting anything in return.

Like Sakamoto's earlier work, *Masuraō* is a series of story arcs climaxing with young, half-nude men duking it out in physical fights, the muscle-packed bodies he draws on full display. Unlike his earlier work however, *Masuraō* is not just a comedy, but a self-parody in which Sakamoto lampoons the conventions of the genre. The series marked a turning point in his career, and later he would focus on more serious work.

After *Masuraō*, Sakamoto created the manga version of Nitta Jirō's *The Climber* (孤高の人), serialized between 2007-2011 in the same Shūeisha manga magazine as *Masuraō* and later published as seventeen single volumes. With *The Climber*, for which he won the 14th Japan Media Arts Festival Award of Excellence in the manga category (2010), we see a significant departure from his earlier style. Gone are the hypermasculine, unrealistically muscled bodies. What remains is Sakamoto's penchant for drawing his characters with pretty faces. In this series Sakamoto's style leans more towards realism, and main character Mori Buntarō is handsome, with a physique that is not overly muscular, but lean and sinewy as required of a professional climber.

The dissonance between the depiction of bodies and faces in Sakamoto's earlier work deserves more attention, but is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I would like to focus on another characteristic of Sakamoto's later work: from the evolution of how he draws bodies and mostly male characters with changes in style most apparent in *The Climber*, to his commitment to an aesthetic that focuses on the beauty of male characters' faces, to the extent where his style makes all characters in *Innocent* (2013-2015) and *Innocent Rouge* (2015- ongoing) androgynous, and the increasing importance of "the monstrous feminine" in his work. The depiction of the monstrous feminine in Sakamoto's oeuvre first appears in *The Climber*, more on this in part two, and is fully fleshed out in his two most recent series, to a point where it is at the center of the narrative in both *Innocent* and *Innocent Rouge* (also discussed in detail in part two), as well as the main attraction for readers.

It wasn't until he created *Innocent*, the first part of his ongoing series about the most notorious executioner in French history, that Sakamoto made a name for himself as a *tanbi* (耽美, aesthetic)⁵⁾ and erotic manga artist. In recent years his work has been featured in anthologies that focus on contemporary erotic (but not *hentai* [perverse]) manga art. The 2014 collection *Gensō Tanbi, Japanese Erotica in Contemporary Art—Paintings, Illustrations, Dolls and More* (PIE publishing), features only eight manga artists among a large number of artists working in different media,⁶⁾ including Sakamoto. The volume *Japan Comic Art—Eros x Fetishism* (2015, Genkōsha)⁷⁾ devotes the middle part of the volume to twenty-five pages of art and an interview by Sakamoto. What stands out here, looking just at the art, is that it is not the famous historical figure and main character of the series, Charles-Henri Sanson who is featured most in Sakamoto's erotic drawings, but his fictional sister Marie-Joseph. Sakamoto's recent work is not just renowned among domestic critics for its erotic aspect, but for its visual story telling among both domestic and foreign sequential art critics. He was among a small number of Japanese manga artists invited to exhibit at the Louvre Museum in Paris.⁸⁾ There is no official English translation of *Innocent* and *Innocent Rouge* available yet, but in France all volumes of *Innocent* (as well as *Masuraō*, *The Climber*, and more of Sakamoto's earlier series) have been translated, *Innocent Rouge* up to vol. 3 (November 2017) and the series is frequently discussed on BD (bande dessinée, Franco-Belgian comics) news sites like ActuaBD.com. In

France, Sakamoto's work enjoys more popularity than it does in Anglophone countries.

2. The Monstrous feminine

The monstrous feminine is a concept that was first used in Film Studies by Barbara Creed, who builds on Kristeva's notion of the abject, but increasingly in other fields relating to visual arts, and in particular comics studies. Creed locates the monstrous feminine in all that is abject, shocking, terrifying, and horrific about being a woman (1993). Therefore, the monstrous feminine is not merely a monster that happens to be female; its monstrosity is located in its femininity. Grendel, Medusa, and the alien queens from the *Alien* franchise, are all manifestations of the monstrous feminine.

The trope was born from misogyny, in particular a fear of the female reproductive power, often combined with a fear of women not being "contained", in the social as well as physical sense, a threat to homosocial order. In 2004 Robyn Longhurst explored how female bodies have long been excluded from physical spaces because they are perceived as leaking fluid, which transgressed ordered, male-dominated spaces. Female fluids like the blood of menstruation (menstrual blood was also discussed by Kristeva as abject, 1982) are seen as contaminants. In the *Alien* franchise, the most famous example of the monstrous feminine in fiction (and most discussed in academia), the alien's acid blood eats through steel as well as human flesh, a terrifying manifestation of the alien's superiority as a life form. Its blood is as monstrous as its ability to rape human bodies, regardless of the victim's sex or gender, to use as incubators for its young. In *Innocent* and *Innocent Rouge*, we see the main characters, all executioners or members of an executioner family, though relatively well-off and respected out of fear, are discriminated and seen as contaminated by most of the population because of their association with the blood of those they kill. Sakamoto however resists depicting the onset of menarche as a crisis: his monstrous female character acknowledges it briefly and swiftly dismisses it as a mere nuisance.

Sakamoto's subversion of the monstrous feminine as empowering rather than misogynist did not come out of a vacuum but is part of a larger cultural trend. Entering the 2000s, numerous artists have subverted the trope, including pop singer Lady Gaga, known to her fans (the "little monsters") as Mother Monster, and one important recent example in comics is writer Marjorie Liu's and artist Sana Takeda's series *Monstress* (Image Comics, 2015- ongoing),⁹⁾ which made the New York Times Bestseller list and is hailed as a rare and exemplary feminist narrative in comics.

Liu and Sakamoto have similar aims creating their narratives: with *Monstress*, Liu hopes to open up a conversation about racism, feminism, and slavery (quoted in an interview with McMillan, 2015), while Sakamoto says the *Innocent* series is first and foremost about prejudice and says it is also about thoughts he has on gender on an everyday basis: that it's fine for men to cry, and that it's fine for women to be strong (interview in *Japan Comic Book Art—Eros x Fetishism*, 2015: 94). The two stories differ significantly in the way their main characters relate to their own monstrosity: Liu's heroine Maika fears the monster that lives inside her, it is a separate entity, and she is reluctant to become that monster because it makes her eat people. Marie-Joseph on the other hand embraces the monster and never questions her status as a killer: she makes sure those around her know that she can and will kill them, often but not necessarily with the blessing of the state. Whereas Maika is hunted and threatened by those who seek to possess her and her monstrous power, Marie-Joseph destroys whoever seeks to possess her, control her, or even waxes poetically about their wish to protect her. When a male revolutionary rambles about how the revolution will bring freedom for every man, equality for every man, as well as brotherhood, and adds that every man

will be able to marry and protect his woman, an irritated Marie-Joseph cuts him down and says she doesn't need any man and won't be part of a man's dreams, a proto-feminist statement.¹⁰⁾ She is not interested in the lofty goals of the revolution, nor is she interested in maintaining the status quo. She is apolitical, but also looking forward to watching the world burn as two powerful opposing forces head for all-out conflict. In this sense, she is similar to the *Batman* series' Cat Woman, neither villain nor hero, occupying a morally ambiguous middle ground. As the monstrous female, she is out and proud rather than secretive and avoidant about her nature.

2.1 Predatory female sexuality in *The Climber*

The Climber, the manga version of the novel by the same name by Nitta Jirō, based on the life of rock climber Katō Buntarō (1905–1936), is a tale of severe hardship. It is a non-linear narrative where scenes of the climbers' everyday lives mingle with fearing they will die in a snowstorm, having to leave wounded friends behind to die or risk freezing to death themselves, and witnessing wounded climbers cutting themselves loose and falling to their deaths, sacrificing their own lives to save their comrades. As with his manga based on the life of Sanson, for the manga version of *The Climber* Sakamoto took a lot of artistic liberties, creating an intriguing narrative that is significantly different from Nitta's novel but visually highly interesting, as expressed by the jury of the Japan Media Arts Festival under "Reason for Award".¹¹⁾

Coming down from a mountain, protagonist Mori Buntarō is regarded as a kind of monster, as the only survivor of a mountaineering expedition, he is seen as suspect and possible superhuman. Although aware of how others see him, he does play the role of monster well, and later refuses to leave the side of a dying member of the Fourteen Mountain Expedition, although these members, following their guide's orders, earlier had left him behind to die.

There are several instances in *The Climber* where the monstrous feminine appears, as a metaphor for the danger of mountaineering, but also as a metaphor of predatory female sexuality; in other scenes the mountain itself is portrayed as a femme fatale. A crevice in a rock face is depicted as a women's vulva, with the ability to be welcoming or treacherous, warm or frigid.

In chapter 51,¹²⁾ Buntarō is set up on a blind date by his boss. He doesn't like the look of the girl, is disgusted by the way she brings food to her mouth, and envisions her as a praying mantis,¹³⁾ feasting on him as her prospective mate the way she devours her food. He panics, slaps the money for his part of the meal on the table and runs, leaving behind the girl, who looks hurt and confused. Later he cannot get the image of the mantis out of his mind when his boss tells him marriage would be good for him, and it's no coincidence that the ridges on the mantis' front legs (segment beneath the tibial spines) make them look disturbingly like the blade of a pick axe. In Buntarō's imagination, the girl's romantic interest in him becomes predatory and potentially lethal. Buntarō is not afraid or disgusted by every woman throughout the series; he has female rock climber friends, and in later chapters he falls in love, marries, and has a family. Nevertheless, the first time Sakamoto uses the monstrous female, depicting a girl as an insect that cannibalizes its mate, does read as an expression of the character's misogyny, and while visually fascinating, it is an orthodox, not particularly exiting way of using the trope.

2.2 The beautiful monsters of *Innocent* and *Innocent Rouge*

Beauty is what makes the monster dangerous because beauty makes it attractive, seductive. The historical Charles-Henri is said to have been attractive for his age. He was tall, well-nourished, as the Sansons were wealthy, strong because his profession involves physical labor, and portly in middle age, which was

also regarded as attractive since it was a sign of wealth (Adachi, 2003, introduction of the Kindle edition). Sakamoto's version of Charles-Henri is a far cry from the portly man of historic record. In the manga (drawn like this until well into middle age), Charles-Henri has skin as white as snow, hair as black as coal, and lips as pink as a rose. With long wavy hair down to his hips, he looks much more like a cross-dressing Snow White than a fearsome executioner. The depiction creates a jarring contrast between the image of the monster who killed three thousand people and the young boy who disliked violence and bloodshed (a theme both Adachi and Sakamoto come back to throughout their narratives); Sakamoto's Beauty is as reluctant a Beast as he is in historic record.

Because Charles-Henri is drawn like the archetypical *bishōnen* (美少年, beautiful young boy) type of young man popularized by 1970s shōjo manga and later in the shōnen'ai genre (boys' love, now BL, male/male romance novels by/for female creators/consumers), the series' popularity among female readers grew steadily. As pop culture and fantasy/SciFi critic Kotani Mari says, female readers require monsters as well as gender subversion in fantasy (2005), and *Innocent* provides them with both from the get-go. As mentioned before, the seinen manga magazines in which Sakamoto's stories are serialized, often feature photographs of young women in bikinis on the cover, objectifying women's bodies. Sakamoto's art has been on the front cover of *Grand Jump* several times, featuring either Charles-Henri or Marie-Joseph. While Marie-Joseph is always partly dressed in her bright red executioner's coat, on the cover of the May 2016 issue, Charles-Henri is completely naked, holding only a sword and a scale, his hair is loose and there are lush white roses in the background (also a shōjo manga convention), but there is not a stitch of fabric anywhere. The magazine has also featured a two-page color spread of a sleeping Charles-Henri, again naked and androgynous looking. There have been half nude males on the covers of seinen manga before, but these were buff, muscular aspirational models like the hero Kinnikuman [キン肉マン, muscleman], but it is probably the first time a male character with an androgynous physique, including his lower body, is shown fully naked (his genitals are strategically hidden by the hand that holds the sword).

When Sakamoto includes a homoerotic arc in one of the first volume of *Innocent*, the work attracted the attention of a particular group of female readers, *fujoshi* (腐女子, rotten girls, a self-deprecating description of fans of shōnen'ai/BL narratives). A young Charles-Henri meets another beautiful young boy who does not fear or loathe him for his profession. Other than a kiss, they never get a chance to act on their mutual attraction; the next time Charles-Henri meets the boy is hours before he has to execute him. The boy has been convicted of heresy for the possession of an English bible (as a scapegoat for his father) and is barely recognizable after hours of torture and sexual assault by prison guards. Unlike some other contemporary seinen manga artists,¹⁴⁾ Sakamoto did not intentionally try to get the attention of *fujoshi* readers. In an interview with a French news site he says that he wanted to include a homosexual storyline as a way to talk about discrimination, and that homosexual people are still discriminated against today the way people of the lower classes were in 18th century France.¹⁵⁾ There are however many more homoerotic expressions throughout the work. For example, throughout several pages in chapter 36 and chapter 37 of *Innocent Rouge*,¹⁶⁾ while Charles-Henri and Marie-Joseph, in spite of their differences, conspire to kill the Comtesse de la Motte instead of just brand her for her involvement in the affair of the diamond necklace, Charles-Henri's pretty, young son Gabriel is at a salon where an implausibly beautiful Robespierre talks politics to him, looking deep into his eyes, their lips close enough to kiss. Gabriel is completely taken in by Robespierre and blushes. While his son, against his express orders, consorts with revolutionaries, Charles-Henri serves as a shoulder to lean on for Louis XVI, also depicted as a beautiful young man, with a suggestion that they are holding hands.¹⁷⁾

In *Innocent*, Charles-Henri has his first explicitly sexual encounter with a woman, has several affairs, and like his historical counterpart, marries and has children. Nevertheless, we see more instances that put the adult Charles-Henri in situations that are homoerotic and open to queer readings. Another example is his first meeting with the dauphin Louis-Auguste, who will become Louis XVI, and vol. 5 has several pages within the initial chapter depicting an adult Louis XVI kissing his death god. The historical Sanson did not meet Louis XVI until he was middle aged, and only met him three times during his lifetime, including the day of his beheading (discussed by Adachi, 2003). In the manga, Charles-Henri first meets Louis-Auguste during a hunt, when the dauphin is still a child. He too resents his fate and does not want to become king; he would rather die than be king, and Charles-Henri recognizes himself in the child Louis. Louis surprises him by kissing him on the mouth, but rather than wanting to kiss the man, Louis, who has a clear death wish, kisses what Charles-Henri stands for, death. Louis dreams about abolishing the monarchy, and Charles-Henri hopes to be able to do the same with the death penalty.

Creating intimate relationships between the executioners and their victims that were non-existent for the historical Sanson is something Sakamoto does throughout the series, this transmotivation (Genette, 1982: 467) is a common narrative device used in fictionalized accounts of historic events (but also in derivative fiction like parody and homages), to increase the engagement of reader and text by changing the motivations of the POV character, and in the case of *Innocent*, to emphasize how tragic Charles-Henri's lot in life is; he often has to kill the ones he loves.

Coming back then to Charles-Henri's appearance, Sakamoto succeeds in normalizing Charles-Henri's preternatural, fairy-tale like beauty by making almost every single last character in his narrative as pretty as the next. Historical characters that were notoriously not particularly physically attractive, like Robespierre, Danton, Napoleon and many more, are all given Sakamoto's bishōnen make-over. Marie-Joseph too is beautiful, with green eyes and the same long wavy hair as her brother, but blond (like Ikeda Riyoko's Oscar), with an undercut that makes her look like a contemporary punk rocker rather than an 18th century French girl. Because almost every male character is depicted as beautiful as she is, her beauty in no way marks her as feminine, soft, or weak. In *Innocent* and its sequel *Innocent Rouge*, the uncanny beauty of the majority of its characters helps establish them as truly dangerous monsters, betraying our expectation of monsters as ugly and repulsive.

3. Oscar on steroids: Marie-Joseph Sanson

3.1 Marie-Joseph as homage to Ikeda's heroine Oscar

Oscar François de Jarjayes, the main character of Ikeda Riyoko's 1972/1973 series *The Rose of Versailles* (ベルサイユのばら, or berubara for short), still enormously popular throughout Japan forty-five years after its publication, is only barely monstrous: a girl raised as a boy to satisfy her father's desire for a son, she did not have a say in who she wanted to be, but adapts well to the role that is expected of her. Oscar's existence and her ability to fight like a man is a transgression of gender roles. The one time she tries dressing like a girl she makes a fool of herself because she has an unrequited crush on Hans Axel von Fersen. Marie-Joseph on the other hand chooses to live dressed and working as a man herself, and while she prefers male garb, has no qualms or anxiety about dressing as a woman when the occasion requires it. Neither character is transgender, and in a decidedly anachronistic touch, neither of them ever makes an effort to hide that they are women. Both talk in a rather gender neutral way, with Marie-Joseph's speech slightly more forceful, more direct, and often, in a way that comes over as arrogant, referring to herself

in the third person. Marie-Joseph is a clear homage to Oscar, but at the same time, reads as a stronger, updated version, emotionally unaffected by romance, much more ruthless and thus better equipped to survive the turmoil of the revolution than Oscar was.

Marie-Joseph's career path runs parallel to that of Oscar; as Marie-Antoinette's guard, Oscar gets very close to the future queen, and as the executioner of Versailles as well as Marie-Antoinette's guard, so does Marie-Joseph. Her character is so blatantly an homage to Oscar's character that Marie-Joseph, just like Oscar, has a loyal suitor called André who has been devoted to her since childhood. Oscar falls in love with and marries her André right before dying in the Storming of the Bastille, when she switches allegiances from the crown to the people. In contrast, Marie-Joseph scoffs at her André's love and takes his loyalty for granted. Although as good-looking, reliable, and competent in battle as Oscar's André, Marie-Joseph sees her André as nothing but a servant she can rely on in a pinch, at one point calling him back to do her bidding after ignoring him for a full ten years. Later we see her change her position, and she will not rest until every single last member of the aristocracy is dead. However, while Oscar is in the trenches at the start of the revolution and sacrifices her life for the greater good, Marie-Joseph sits calmly in a chair and nurses her toddler; she plots and kills strategically, but when avoidable, will not risk her life or that of her child. While Oscar's death can be read as metaphorical (the first ever kiss in girls manga was that between Oscar and André, their love scene too pushed the genre beyond the boundaries of what had so far been possible in media for female adolescents, and it was a good place to end the series), Marie-Joseph is more calculated about avoiding death for herself as well as her offspring. Oscar's marriage was about romantic love, a happy end before the end of her life; Marie-Joseph has no particular concept of happiness, her actions are about survival. Her marriage is as utilitarian as it was for many men of her age: to protect her personal freedom, and to produce an heir, not an end but part of a process. Marie-Joseph's character, while inspired by Oscar, is not a mere derivative, she goes through a pragmatic transformation, and her monstrous characteristics protect her from suffering a fate similar to Oscar.

In Ikeda's *Rose of Versailles*, one of the most famous and romantic lines said by Marie-Antoinette is that if Oscar were a man, she would have wanted to marry her. This line opens the text up to a lesbian reading that is never made explicit by Ikeda. In *Innocent*, when Marie-Antoinette hints that her recent marriage to the young dauphin is sexually unfulfilling, Marie-Joseph starts an affair with her, explicitly drawn and including a panel where Sakamoto quotes Gustav Klimt's painting *The Kiss* (1907/1908). Oscar's romance with André is also open to queer readings: since Oscar is a cross dresser and was brought up as a boy, their relationship can be read as gay, but it can also be read as lesbian (Anan, 2014: 48). Shamoon argues that when André loses his sight (first he loses one eye in battle, then sight in the other), his complete blindness can be interpreted as a loss of masculinity (2007: 12). Oscar dies after she has intercourse just once, the day after her wedding night with André. Whereas Oscar's monstrousness lies in her transgressing of gender roles and to contemporary readers is not as controversial as it was in the early 1970s, Marie-Joseph's is emphasized by her continued survival, her refusal to pay the ultimate price, or any price, for any of her transgressions but in particular the sexual ones, like seducing the future queen.

Ever since the success of Ikeda's series, the French Revolution is a setting that speaks to manga artists and its audiences, and there are more manga series that are set in France during the revolution, many inspired by but none more famous than *The Rose of Versailles*. Interesting here is that they invariably open themselves up to queer readings, and include the monstrous feminine to a greater or lesser extent. Sakamoto's *Innocent & Innocent Rouge* are the only ones that come close to approaching its popularity, but it is unlikely that they will steal the crown. Other noteworthy examples are *Chevalier* (シェバリエ

—), a historic fantasy series by Ubukata Tō (author) and Yumeji Kiriko (art), in which the main character is based on the Chevalier (knight) d'Eon, a historically gender-bending figure that also served as inspiration for the character of Ikeda's Oscar. Both Charles-Henri Sanson and the Chevalier d'Eon are characters in the mobile game *Fate/Grand Order* (Aniplex, 2015). A more recent manga series set during the French revolution is *Versailles of The Dead* (ベルサイユオブザデッド, 2017, Big Comics),¹⁸⁾ an ongoing series by Suekane Kumiko, which uses the current globally popular trend of incorporating zombies into the narrative. Like *Innocent*, this series is also popular with readers of Boys' Love narratives as its interpretation of the character of Marie-Antoinette is a male imposter,¹⁹⁾ enabling a queer reading of the relationship between Louis-Auguste and this secretly male princess.

3.2 Marie-Joseph as Charles-Henri's dark side

Charles-Henri Sanson, the historical figure as well as Sakamoto's fictionalized version, was a devout, studious young man who resented being born into a family of professional death dealers, the hat of the Monsieur de Paris, Paris' official executioner, handed down from father to son. He followed in his forefathers' footsteps reluctantly, and his greatest feat was to replace the barbaric execution methods of 18th century France with a much more modern, much more efficient tool: the guillotine. Ironically, in spite of Charles-Henri's distaste for torture, cruelty and killing, the invention of the guillotine led to the deaths of many more than could have been killed by the old methods, until France abolished the death penalty and the use of the guillotine in the second half of the 1970s (the Sanson family worked as executioners until the mid 1800s). Known for killing over three thousand people including the last king of France, Sanson went down in historical record as a monster, an image he would not have chosen for himself.

The historically accurate parts of Sakamoto's series are heavily sourced from Adachi Masahiro's 2003 biography of Sanson, also published by Shūeisha, and to this day (2017/12/13), almost fifteen years after it was first published, Adachi's book is still the number one bestseller in its category (French history) on Amazon.co.jp, in part due to the popularity of Sakamoto's manga series (as mentioned by many reviewers who read the manga first and then developed an interest in the historical figure).

In Sakamoto's narrative, Marie-Joseph, Charles-Henri's fictional sister, is the embodiment of Charles-Henri's dark side, and his better (more accomplished) half, the anima to his animus in Jungian terms. Both are frequently referred to as *shinigami* (死神, death gods) and *bakemono* (化物, monsters) or *kemono* (獣, beasts). His partner in the killing business, she's the better killer among the two of them in spite of their twelve-year age difference. Not only is she less hesitant, as an executioner she displays near superhuman strength, succeeding in difficult executions²⁰⁾ that Charles-Henri sometimes failed to carry out so abysmally he was at risk of the angry mob surrounding the platform lynching him. At the age of eleven, Marie-Joseph uses a sword to behead the man who raped her when she was nine. More proactive than Salome, no one needs to bring her the head of a man who insulted her on a platter: she will go get it herself. She is so adept at killing that when she is still a tween, she gets appointed as the official executioner of Versailles, a fictional position.

Charles-Henri is a squeamish grim reaper, horrified by the suffering of those he must kill or bring dishonor to his family, but he resigns himself to his fate. In contrast, Marie-Joseph is a consummate killer and does it with a smile on her face, reminiscent of the *Batman* series' Joker, and she revels in her power over life and death. According to Donna Haraway, the monster both illuminates and threatens boundaries (1992), and for Charles-Henri, Marie-Joseph is this monster, doing things he sometimes wishes he could, but knows he can't. Marie-Joseph starts out as a little monster, a precocious little girl Charles-Henri loves

unconditionally. The very first time he stands up to his tyrannical, abusive grandmother, is to protect his little sister who is being tortured for daring to intervene in executioner duties in spite of her sex, for daring to transgress her gender role traditionally defined within the Sanson family. Their grandmother tells Marie-Joseph that women are not human, that women are lower than cattle, and daughters of executioners grow up to marry the sons of other executioners, as no one else wants to be associated with them. With her keen interest in anatomy and her gift for slaughter, little Marie-Joseph is both creepy and endearing. Her enterprising nature saves Charles-Henri, thus far the point-of-view character, from disgrace when at the tender age of six she suggests using sewing scissors to sever the tendons of would-be king-killer Damien, who four horses can't seem to draw and quarter, hours after his execution has started.

The creepiness of little girls in horror narratives is often enhanced by multiplying them, like the Grady Twins in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1977, based on the novel by Stephen King), or the group of little girls who defeated the monster they were about to be sacrificed to in the horror film *The Cabin in The Woods* (2012). Marie-Joseph however is always better on her own. As a lone she-wolf, she eventually turns on her brother, seeing him as too weak to be an efficient executioner, frequently ridiculing how sensitive he is. To Charles-Henri, Marie-Joseph is an inspiration as well as a muse; if she is with him on the execution platform, he feels invincible. As a little girl she needs him to protect her and her killer impulses, but he soon finds that his little Marie has outgrown him, is beyond his tether and possibly dangerously out of control. He gives her a lot of freedom until he has his own family, his own children, and finds that to protect his legacy, he himself is turning into the monster he never wanted to become.

As Elizabeth Bronfen described in her 1992 seminal work *Over Her Dead Body—Death, femininity and the aesthetic*, the muse is only easily contained when she is dead, and the artist free to mold her image, as was the case for the muses of famous artists like Edgar Allan Poe and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and so many before and after them (59, 168–178). It would have been easy for Sakamoto to kill off Marie-Joseph as soon as Charles-Henri comes into his own, becomes his own monster, which can be read as Marie-Joseph having fulfilled her narrative purpose of pushing him into his rightful role. There is no particular reason to keep her around, since the main character is supposedly Charles-Henri, or is he?

At this point in the series, Marie-Joseph may have had more readers rooting for her than for her brother (and Sakamoto and his editor would have known because of the reader surveys publishers include with every issue of a manga magazine). Killing her would also be cliché to such an extent that in the comics genre this narrative device has its own specialized term: “fridging”.²¹⁾ This term, coined by comics writer Gail Simone,²²⁾ is the convention of killing off a female character to enhance the heroism of a male character. Sakamoto avoids the cliché by turning the relationship between Charles-Henri and his sister into that of rivals who, when push comes to shove, still have each other's backs, while being at each other's throats the rest of the time. In vol. 7 of *Innocent Rouge*, Charles-Henri conspires with their two brothers to execute Marie-Joseph while she is holding her masked, cackling toddler, but she survives and cuts off her brother's arm. At odds through most of the latter part of the narrative, Charles-Henri and Marie-Joseph are still two sides of the same coin, and their combined efforts navigating the treacherous pitfalls of pre-revolutionary and then revolutionary France result in what many, especially those allied with the aristocracy, could not: their survival and that of the Sanson family.

3.3 The child in the iron mask

True to form, and like the alien monster of the franchise by the same name, Marie-Joseph becomes a monstrous mother, birthing monstrous offspring. Sakamoto depicts her wish for a child in a panel where

he references Snow White's mother. Standing in front of an open window, a drop of blood from her finger falling onto the snow on the windowsill, Marie-Joseph looks wistful; shortly after, she mounts her husband and commands him to give her his seed. By this point in the narrative she has been married to her morbidly obese and bed-bound cousin Jean-Louis for years. It is a marriage of convenience that she arranged to avoid getting married to the man Charles-Henri picked for her, someone who wanted to control her and someone she killed for having the brazenness to assume she would let herself be controlled. Jean-Louis allows her to do whatever she pleases as a married woman, for as long as she keeps him well fed. Marie-Joseph keeps her pregnancy and the birth of the child hidden from her family. In chapter 42 of *Innocent Rouge*, she appears at the site of an execution with the baby, a burlap sack over its head, in a closed basket on her back, telling no one what it holds. She puts the baby in the basket under the scaffolding that holds up the breaking wheel for the blacksmith about to be executed. The baby is baptized in blood and crawls out of the basket. When the child is a toddler, she makes it wear an iron mask (that she as well as her daughter can open, unlike that of the infamous prisoner of the Bastille). In sharp contrast to what the burlap sack, the iron mask, and the blood baptism suggest, Marie-Joseph nurtures her child tenderly, and Zero grows up without fear and a strong attachment to her mother. She is intelligent, calm, and in habit of cackling hearing about recent political events or witnessing carnage, her creepiness as a little girl mirroring that of her mother. Thinking about raising her child, Marie-Joseph decides to pick the side of the revolutionaries, the Third Estate, that the Sansons, since they are not aristocracy, have always been a part of. Sakamoto depicts this in a one page panel, markedly different from his own style, that is an homage to Nagai Go's *Devilman*, a work he says he has been influenced by as an erotic artist (*Eros & Fetishism*, 2015: 94), with Marie-Joseph as winged, naked demon charging, holding her child.²³⁾

Conclusion

There is no conclusion yet to Sakamoto's French Revolution epic, but the series has now reached what is possibly its climax, depicting Louis XVI being taken to the place of his execution (chapter 50 in Vol. 7). Charles-Henri, who apparently has reconciled with his younger sister after trying to have her executed, has her young child, Zero, accompany the doomed king. On the last page (228) of the volume, the main character is the guillotine, who Sakamoto calls a new god to replace the old, an "otome" (乙女, girl) who has absolutely no emotions, similar to Marie-Joseph, but closer to her child, the "angel in the iron mask". As the story adheres to most of the significant historical events interwoven with the fictional text, it is fairly certain that readers will soon see Marie-Antoinette beheaded too, possibly at the hands of her former lover, Marie-Joseph (historically, Charles-Henri's son beheaded her). Both series' dramatic retelling of all major executions the historic Sanson was involved in (though often taken over by Marie-Joseph and thus fictionalized) adds a layer of interest for readers who want to learn more about the French revolution, a topic that also has a sense of nostalgia for readers because it is tied to the popularity of Ikeda's early 1970s *Rose of Versailles*, still a bestseller and known to audiences born long after its publication more than forty years on.

Marie-Joseph is a model monster, the misogyny we've come to see as inherent and inevitable in male-created/male-consumed narratives cannot touch nor destroy her. Instead, she is celebrated, and usurped her brother's main character status. Because monsters are transformational and thus full of promise, they can become aspirational, especially for female readers (Kotani, 2005: 189). Marie-Joseph, like Liu's Maika to a certain extent, is an aspirational monster. Stronger than Oscar, the most prominent

gender-bending role model for female readers from the 1970s onward, Marie-Joseph has an indomitable subjectivity within a genre where women are often objectified, and seems to exist outside, or in spite of, the patriarchy. Set in the late 1700s, this makes the character relatable, and a suitable role model for 21st century readers. As another way to connect to contemporary audiences, Sakamoto adds more instances of parody, pastiche, and homage to his series. In some chapters, we get a look at what Marie-Antoinette's Twitter timeline would look like if she had one. In others, we are treated to Charles-Henri cross-dressing, Takarazuka Musical Revue style, singing a duet with his sister and turning the pages of manga into an impromptu musical. As the series progresses, its outrageousness, innovation, and carnivalesque aspects become more prominent, and part of its appeal.

Though Sakamoto is active in a genre that doesn't have the most women-friendly reputation, he succeeds in neutralizing objectification of his female characters by making almost every male character in his stories so beautiful that in appearance, they are often indistinguishable from the female characters. Moreover, as a proto-feminist and an anachronism, with Marie-Joseph he created a character that turns the biography of Sanson into a visual spectacle appreciated by a readership for whom class and gender distinctions are no longer a given the way they were in evolutionary France. Someone like her could not have existed in evolutionary France, where it was understood that the ideals of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* for "all", were only for men. The relations between the most prominent characters open the text up to feminist and queer readings, actively fostered by Sakamoto's inclusion of gay as well as lesbian homoerotic implicit and explicit encounters, as well as heterosexual scenes where the female characters retain their subjectivity. Like *shōjo* manga artists of the 1970s who created a revolution within their manga genre, artists like Sakamoto are now re-inventing and remediating the *shōnen* and *seinen* genres, providing alternative ways to think about gender not just for girl readers, but for a more general readership.

Notes

- 1) This paper is based on the presentation "The Female Gaze and Visual Pleasure: Reading Sakamoto Shin'ichi's *Innocent*", December 16th, 2016 (Day 2) 5th JSA-ASEAN Conference, Cebu, Philippines, Session 5 – C Empowering Manga: Women as Characters, Artists, and Consumers.
- 2) Boys reading less than girls is a worldwide phenomenon; the drop in the amount of male manga readers compared to the 1990s is in part because of the general decline of publishing culture, but also caused by male readers getting more invested in interactive narratives like online RPGs and other web-based games.
- 3) He was the winner of the 1990 70th *Shōnen Jump* H'S Prize, for his debut work *Keith!*
- 4) Serialized in the *seinen* manga magazine *Young Jump Comics*, later published as seven single volumes.
- 5) *Tanbi* denotes a particular kind of aesthetic or artistic sensitivity. It refers to a decadent sense of beauty and is often used in connection with female readership's interest in androgynous male beauty, popularized in the 1970s in *shōjo* and *shōnen'ai* narratives (For a detailed discussion of *tanbi* and its history in manga, girls and boys love manga in particular, see Ishida Minori, 2008).
- 6) The volume is 320 pages long, and features the erotic art of eighteen fine artists, ten illustrators, eight doll makers, four figurine makers, and eight manga artists.
- 7) The other six artists featured draw in the Boys' Love genre, like Nakamura Asumiko, or the *eroguro* (エログロ, erotic grotesque) genre, like Maruo Suehiro.
- 8) Sakamoto as well as the other artists featured in the exhibition each contributed a story about the Louvre, drawn in their respective styles, Sakamoto incorporating his Marie Antoinette and Charles-Henri Sanson characters. These works have been published both in Japanese, French, and Taiwanese as *Les Reveurs du Louvre* [The dreamers of the Louvre] and were also included in the catalogue of the exhibition, titled *Louvre No. 9* (漫画、9番目の芸術, the number nine standing for comics as the ninth art) also includes Sakamoto's work.
- 9) *Monstress* won the 2017 Hugo Award for Best Graphic Story.

- 10) Chapter 30, 真紅の命題 [Rouge's proposition], pp. 65-93, vol. 5 of *Innocent Rouge*.
- 11) Page archived online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110919081809/http://plaza.bunka.go.jp/english/festival/2010/manga/KOKONOHITO/> (Last accessed 2018/01/08)
- 12) 初冠雪 [First Crown Snow], pp. 159-187 of vol. 5.
- 13) In cultures where the black widow spider is native, women who mate and kill are often referred to as such, while in cultures where they aren't, the image of the praying mantis is used. Another example of this is the 2017 French TV mini series *La Mante* (The Mantis), featuring a female serial killer.
- 14) The best example of a shōnen/seinen manga series intentionally trying to get the attention of fujoshi readers is the 2011 reboot of Tezuka Osamu's *Black Jack* series, *Young Black Jack*. Tezuka Productions gave the artist of the series license to create homoerotic panels, covers, frontispieces and merchandize unrelated to the storyline, in which Black Jack the younger, a medical student, is posed in various sensual and erotic entanglements with his older self, Black Jack the unlicensed, rogue surgeon. (See Bauwens-Sugimoto, 2016)
- 15) Quote from the original French: "Je voulais briser les préjugés négatifs qui existent encore aujourd'hui, et faire le parallèle avec les rapports de classe qu'il y avait à l'époque. Les nobles regardaient de haut les gens du peuple. C'est le même mépris que produit aujourd'hui le racisme ou l'homophobie."
- 16) Chapter 36, 天誅の針 [The needle of divine punishment], pp. 34-61, and 37, 最高存在 [Supreme Being ; in reference to what Robespierre means to Gabriel], pp. 62-88, Vol. 6 of *Innocent Rouge*.
- 17) Illustration published by Sakamoto on his Instagram feed on December 9th, 2017. The caption telling us Louis knows he is trapped, but still hopes to support Charles-Henri in creating a better future (original Japanese: 「僕にはもう自由がない… せめてかつて君と夢見た平等で平和な未来に加担させてくれ—」)
- 18) One single volume published to date, with the second one appearing in January of 2018.
- 19) In the story, Marie Antoinette has a twin brother who travels with her from Austria to France. Along the way, their carriage is attacked by zombies, and only the twin brother survives. Not wanting to risk war with France for failing to produce a suitable bride, the Austrian prince pretends he's his sister and marries Louis-Auguste.
- 20) Before the guillotine, beheadings in Paris were done by sword, and often went horribly wrong because cutting right between the vertebrae of the neck on a terrified, often squirming person is difficult and requires months if not years of training in addition to significant upper body strength. When things went wrong, some of the condemned were only half-beheaded, or cut in the face, and the crowd of onlookers, there to see a spectacle as well as justice served, did not appreciate executions going awry (Adachi, 2003).
- 21) In one of the most memorable instances where the trope was used the girlfriend of a character from the comic book series *The Green Lantern*, was murdered and stuffed into a refrigerator for him to find and the story to evolve into a revenge plot.
- 22) Simone maintains a list of female comic book characters killed off just to elicit a reaction from a male character on her website "Women in Refrigerators" (<http://lby3.com/wir/>)
- 23) Chapter 44, 血塗られた道 [Road painted in blood], pp. 36-61, vol. 7 of *Innocent Rouge*.

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