

A Dream Dress for Girls: Milk, Fashion and Shōjo Identity¹

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A beautiful girl is lying on a maroon-colored leather sofa. In a medium-long shot, she is dressed in a white blouse with a big matching ribbon, and an above-knee-length skirt with a silhouette resembling a blooming flower. A white lace headdress adorns her immaculately curled, flowing locks. Somehow contradicting her hyperbolically girlish, rather “passive” appearance, the young woman faces us directly with a faint yet bold smile, her eyes making piecing contact with those who are viewing her in what semioticians would call a demanding, “assertive” position. This interpretation is further supported by her forming her left hand into the shape of a gun, a typically “masculine” gesture. The picture is of famous twenty-year-old fashion model Kishimoto Cecil in a magazine-book dedicated to Japanese fashion brand Milk (2011). The juxtaposition of an eminently girlish aesthetic with an assertive, “masculine” posture visually outlines an aspect of the concept of “shōjo” in Japanese culture.

Shōjo literally means “girl or maiden,” but it frequently points to a culturally crafted concept laden with values and history. Despite the cultural significance of the concept, it has long been overlooked as a legitimate scholarly topic. Honda Masuko, a pioneer in Japanese girls’ studies, first started publishing research on the topic in the 1980s.² According to Aoyama Tomoko, this situation has since been ameliorated and a boom in the study of Japanese shōjo followed after 2007.³ Honda’s innovative theory of the shōjo aesthetic, which she termed *hirahira*, casts light upon sartorial items such as ribbons, frills and swinging hem skirts as quintessential to the aesthetic and image of shōjo. But with the exception of the now well-documented Japanese *Lolita* fashion, theoretical analysis of the association between shōjo and clothing and fashion is still a

rarity. I believe this is a significant gap, as the image of shōjo is largely conveyed through visual cues of dress, gesture and appearance.

Paying particular attention to Honda's groundbreaking work, my aim in this chapter is to uncover significant meanings behind shōjo fashion. I contend that fashion aesthetic is crucially intertwined with the process of crafting and sustaining the image of shōjo, and further that this aesthetic subverts the stereotypical equation of girlish (shōjo) femininity with derogatory sexualization, values denounced as weak, passive and unfavorable in many Euro-American societies. The shōjo fashion aesthetic inverts these negative traditional associations into positive and empowering ones. Consequently, shōjo fashion can serve as an alternative to the monolithic idea of women's fashion, which tends to be understood via the diametric opposition of forced sexualization and exaggerated modesty. In particular, I apply a combination of cultural studies and fashion studies in order to focus on the relationship between dress, gender, culture, and identity.

Shōjo Aesthetics and History

Honda Masuko linked such sartorial items as ribbons and flounces to the concept of shōjo. For Honda, these ornaments symbolized a dreamy, imaginative, and intimate sphere embraced by young women.⁴ She defines the state of shōjo as the period between childhood and womanhood, in which the girl's imagination turns into a romantic space of liminality, a shōjo-*scape* where the "girl" can indulge in a momentary reverie unconstrained by the social trammels believed to be attached to "womanhood."⁵

Delicate and "impractical" sartorial items, which Honda calls *hirahira* due to the way they flutter, visually manifest this dreamscape. For Honda, a fashion aesthetic of excessive lace, frills, ribbons, and the fluttering movements such garments make,

together signal lightness, delicacy, and the transient freedom ascribed to a state of liminal femininity.⁶ This idea of shōjo assigns a degree of independence to the category of adolescent girls and hence separates them from both older and younger women. Perhaps recalling its origin as a “hyper-feminine ideal” in the early 1900s,⁷ Honda’s girlish aesthetic of *hirahira* indicates that such pre-war shōjo aesthetics are still valid today.⁸

Despite the “girlish” image, what is striking about the concept of shōjo is its presumed “asexual” quality. Shōjo are often considered as asexual, “pure,” comparatively autonomous beings. This does not necessarily mean, however, that shōjo are immune from either eroticization or the objectifying (male) gaze; indeed, the opposite is often the case, for the innocent and pure image of shōjo can be read as highly sexual to some individuals.⁹ Yet, it is also true that the “asexuality” associated with shōjo can—even if subtly—subvert preconceptions regarding sexuality and gender, as “[p]erforming shōjo [can be] one active and dynamic way that Japanese women can control their sexuality.”¹⁰

One such example can be found in Japanese *Lolita* fashion, which is known for its hyperbolically girlish, decorative style, and appreciation of European dress forms of the early-modern and Romantic periods. Like the image of shōjo, *Lolita* fashion is generally “pre-sexual,” despite the possibility of the style veering into the sexualized.¹¹ The decorativeness can simultaneously emphasize girlishness and draw attention away from the body of the wearer by concealing its shape, hence maybe operating against eroticization.¹² This is because, as Honda argues of *hirahira*, the aesthetics symbolized by decorative sartorial items signal “girlish” femininity while actually hiding a woman’s body, thereby allowing “simultaneous denial of womanhood and emphasis of femininity.”¹³ This view is innovative given that fashion for young women and

adolescent girls in particular tends to be understood via the dichotomy of overt sexualization and passive modesty, leading to greater difficulty in locating a place in between this decency continuum in Euro-American culture.¹⁴ Contributing to this is a tendency in Euro-American societies to regard girlish femininity negatively, as an unfavorable, unstable and even pathological stage of life that requires adult intervention and regulation.¹⁵

The concept of *shōjo*, therefore, is not only an imposed idealized construction, but also a means embraced and manipulated by girls themselves. Here we might notice some similarities between *shōjo* and the concept of “*kawaii*,” often translated as “cute.”¹⁶ The definition of *kawaii* is complex and too broad to be fully explored here, but a common type of *kawaii* in fashion is a style that is “deliberately designed to make the wearer appear childlike and demure.”¹⁷ Although *shōjo* and *kawaii* are not synonymous, it is important to recognize that *shōjo* femininity is frequently materialized by *kawaii* fashion aesthetics. Indeed, fashion brand Milk, which we will examine shortly, is well known for offering romantic and girlish yet edgy styles, and it often uses the term *kawaii* when describing these designs.

Historically the image of *shōjo* has largely been crafted and conveyed through visual culture, such as magazines, illustrations, paintings, and manga.¹⁸ The fashion designer and stylist **Nakahara Jun'ichi** created illustrations which influenced both *shōjo* manga culture¹⁹ and fashion figures with girlish design sensibilities such as **Kenzō Takada**, **Kenzo**, **Keita**, **Maruyama Keita** and **Kaneko Isao**.²⁰ Nakahara (1913–1983), who is especially celebrated for his illustrations and fashion designs in girls' magazines, continuously promulgated images of elegantly dressed, ladylike young women. His ideal girls are exquisitely dressed, sophisticated young women with delicately coiffed hair, tiny ribbons, thin waists and long limbs, which were and still are an embodiment

of shōjo.²¹ In shōjo as in other styles, dress is a quintessential medium to craft and communicate the identity of the wearer.

Dress as Connoting Shōjo Identity

While some try to distinguish dress from clothes, styles from fashion, and fashion from dress, these terms are often used interchangeably. In fashion studies, one definition of dress is given by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher:

Dress . . . includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewellery, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements.²²

Valerie Steele defines fashion as “the cultural construction of the embodied identity . . . the term fashion embraces all forms of self-fashioning—from street styles like punk and hip hop to body alterations such as tattooing and piercing.”²³ Steele’s definition of fashion is very similar to Roach-Higgins and Eicher’s definition of dress, and in this chapter I will use the terms interchangeably.

Dress “embellishes the body, the materials commonly used adding a whole array of meanings to the body that would otherwise not be there.”²⁴ In other words, dress is considered as carrying symbolic meanings—it is a means of communication.²⁵ However, caution is required, because the meanings communicated via clothing are often “highly differentiated in terms of taste, social identity, and person’s access to the symbolic wares of a society.”²⁶ While dress is considered to carry symbolic meanings, the meanings it carries can be very subtle and complex. As Steele brilliantly articulates, they are more like music:

[T]hey are expressive in an indirect and allusive way. There is rarely a single meaning attached to each article of clothing. Instead, its meanings depend on the context—who wears it? When? Along with what other clothes? What was the history of the garment?²⁷

This means that there are certain “shared” qualities of the dress or look that evoke the qualities of “shōjo-ness” in Japanese culture, and they are most likely related to the aforementioned idea of shōjo as put forward by Honda’s girlish aesthetic of *hirahira*, including its association with flowers, frills, ribbons, and fluttering skirts. Looking more closely at the concept of shōjo in Japanese fashion culture, one might notice that references to two well-known European girlish icons have significantly influenced the image of shōjo fashion: the character of Alice portrayed in Sir John Tenniel’s famous illustrations of Lewis Carroll’s books; and romantic ballerinas.

With the first full translation of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* into Japanese in 1910, Alice began her identification with the concept of shōjo in contemporary Japanese culture.²⁸ One of the arenas in which the imagery of Alice has been an enduring inspiration is the realm of fashion. For example, Atsuki Onishi (est. 1983), a fashion label popular in the 1980s, had a fashion spread in the February 18, 1985 issue of now-discontinued girls’ fashion magazine *Olive* titled “I want to be Alice in Wonderland in this dreamy season,” which featured a cotton sweater, a bustier, a shirt, a pair of skinny pants and a long flared skirt, on all of which were printed illustrations of Alice.²⁹ The October 2007 issue of *Sō-En*, one of the oldest Japanese high-fashion magazines, included a twenty-two-page fashion spread, along with feature articles, on the theme of *Alice*. The feature story “Looking for Alice” (*Arisu wa o sagashite*) tells how such Japanese fashion brands as Jane Marple (est. 1985), a brand known for its classical,

romantic and upper-class young lady-like styles, derive inspirations from *Alice*, saying: “Even after 142 years since the book’s publication, Alice exists as the ideal of *shōjo*.”³⁰

Alice is symbolic of Victorian upper-class girlhood,³¹ and the dress styles of Victorian girls seem to have inspired Japanese *shōjo* fashion aesthetics. The three virtues of *shōjo* in pre-war Japan—“affection” (*aijō*), “chastity” (*junketsu*), and “aesthetics” (*biteki*)³²—arguably dovetailed with the ideals of Victorian feminine beauty: “maternal, childlike, and seductive” as well as “healthy, natural, and virtuous.”³³ Hence, there was an affinity between youthful late-Victorian and Japanese *shōjo* femininities.

Shōjo, Alice and Victorian Femininity

The popular image of Alice is largely influenced by Sir John Tenniel’s famous illustrations, and Walt Disney’s subsequent animated adaptation (1951).³⁴ This is true in Japanese culture in the twenty-first century in such *Alice*-themed music videos as Tommy February/Heavenly’s “Wait For Me There” (2009) and manga works like Mochizuki Jun’s *Pandora Hearts* (2006 – 2015). Tenniel’s Alice is dressed in the fashion current at the time when the book was published: Victorian upper class, with a nod to practicality. According to Elizabeth Ewing, Alice

wears a simple dress with a simple bodice and a straight, full skirt with some rows of tucks at the hem, to allow for her growth. The dress has short puff sleeves and a tiny turn-down collar. Over it goes a pinafore, also with small sleeves, plus two pockets...and she has plain, light stockings and flat ankle-strap shoes with rather square toes...³⁵

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A dress with short puff sleeves and a full skirt is visually symbolic of Alice's shōjo-ness. This is particularly evident in the fact that the skirt is calf-length. Until the 1920s, the age hierarchy of upper-class women's dress styles in Europe was largely demarcated through skirt length. Young girls wore short skirts, and length increased with the age of the wearer, with the skirts of teenage girls approaching ankle length to connote their "maturity."³⁶ Alice's almost "childlike" dress quality, characterized by her above-knee skirt, is clearly shared by *Alice*-inspired Japanese fashion items from brands like Jane Marple and Emily Temple Cute (est. 1999).³⁷

In a similar reference to mid-to-late Victorian girls' dresses, Peter Weir's celebrated Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975, first released in Japan in 1986) depicts a group of upper-class schoolgirls in late-Victorian-period Australia and their mystifying disappearance during a picnic on St. Valentine's Day. Praised by Honda as an "eternal fable of shōjo,"³⁸ the girls in the film wear white, high-collared, vertical-silhouetted lace or frilly muslin dresses of slightly below calf-length, most of them with long locks and black stockings. When Irma, the only one of the missing schoolgirls who has returned, visits the college to bid her farewell she wears a long floral-patterned dress that reaches her toes, covered with a vivid red cape and a matching hat that decorates her neatly coifed hair, thereby signaling her departure from the shōjo-scape.³⁹ Thus, the girlish qualities of these mid-to-late Victorian girls are emphasized by their (relatively) short "little girl" dresses and the lightness of such garments, which endorses Honda's *hirahira* aesthetic.⁴⁰

Like *Alice*, *Picnic* was and still is loved by a certain group of women in Japan due to its dreamy interior design and dresses, and its exquisite, maidenly ambience.⁴¹ In fact, *Olive* cites *Picnic* as a source of reference for vintage Victorian style with white lace and frills when it was first released in Japan.⁴² Similarly, light, lacy, frilly dresses

in pastel shades that resemble the muslin dresses worn by the girls in *Picnic* are still favored in Japanese fashion culture in the twenty-first century. Volume 15-6 of popular young women's fashion magazine *non-no* (2010), for instance, chose white, flowing miniskirts as the fifth most popular item for girls, and lacy, frilly white dresses with old-world charm as the most popular item for attracting boys, with the accompanying taglines describing the items as “innocent” (*seiso*), “*kawaii*” and “girlish” (*onnanoko-ppoi*).⁴³ Likewise, in the January 2016 issue of the same magazine, a white, calf-length romantic dress is described as “the dress that everyone loves.”⁴⁴ Fashion aesthetics that resemble Victorian girlish icons like Alice and the girls in *Picnic* still retain a significant appeal to girls in contemporary Japan, not only for attracting admirers but also for the preference of the wearers themselves.

Another icon that is frequently associated with shōjo fashion is the romantic ballerina. Casual fashion labels from Milk, Emily Temple Cute and Jane Marple to *Lolita* fashion brand Innocent World and more mature, high-fashion label Rekisami (est. 2007 by former ballet dancer Kisada Chika) have produced dresses and shoes that are, explicitly or implicitly, inspired by ballerina's costumes.⁴⁵ These include full, cascading tulle skirts and ribbon shoes, like the puff-sleeved, above-knee-length tulle dress called “Tutu-donna” (Milk 2014) and the tulle ribbon shoes on which Rekisami collaborated with Australian dancewear company Bloch (2014). Historically, it is argued that the garments of the ballerina in the Romantic period referred to both girlhood and light movements.

Ethereal Maidens and Princesses: The Inspiration of Romantic Ballerinas

Our visual image of the ballerina is largely informed by the romantic tutu and ribbon pointe shoes that she wears, both of which are the products of the Romantic

period (around 1832, especially since 1841), with allusions to early modern European aristocratic dresses, such as nineteenth-century dress shoes and the *chemise à la reine*.⁴⁶ The origin of this tube-like dress might be traced to the *robe à la créole*, a loose, lightweight white muslin chemise dress which was brought to France from the colony of Saint-Dominique (modern-day Haiti) during the 1770s, and was made famous by Queen Marie-Antoinette in 1783.⁴⁷ It was a juvenile summer garment with an air of simplicity and classicism, therefore reinscribing the connection to girlhood.⁴⁸ Indeed, this dress introduced “charming simplicity” to girls’ dresses in Euro-America, which was “retained for nearly half a century” until the fullness and extravagance of women’s fashion overtook girls’ fashion in the early Victorian period.⁴⁹

The perpetual appeal that ballet costumes have had for girls is described by Judith Chazin-Bennahum, who describes the nineteenth-century ballet girl as follows: “she would become an extraordinarily beautiful dream girl, an ethereal being, wearing costumes of rich fabrics and embroideries and . . . would live in a gloriously romantic world.”⁵⁰ Such a romantic vision of the ballerina still remains today as “a universal sign of an appropriate style of femininity—couth and graceful, yet disciplined and regulated.”⁵¹ While the history of ballet in Japan is relatively young (since around 1910), this highly romanticized vision of the ballerina is prevalent in its culture.

Celebrated and beloved Japanese ballerina Yoshida Miyako and teenage ballet dancer Maeda Sae both note the charm of ballet dancers’ outfits as their primary motivation for learning the art form.⁵² This view is further reinforced by Kyoto International Manga Museum’s recent exhibition devoted to “ballet manga.”⁵³ It underlines that the concept of ballet is almost always associated with the image of “a white tutu and *chaussons de pointe*” in Japan, thereby elucidating the significant roles ballet dresses play within the material culture of *shōjo*. Indeed, styles inspired by the

classic ballerina were featured extensively in *Olive*,⁵⁴ and as recently as 2016, *non-no* featured ballerina-like cascading tulle skirts as an essential item that creates a sweet, relaxed and girlish look.⁵⁵

The opulent aura of ballet could also be related to the concept of aristocratic fantasy in Japan, namely the “princess boom,” which first became prominent in the 1950s.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, I have argued that classical ballet and the figure of the ballerina in the late 1950s and early 1960s was an ideal vehicle for young girls to participate in this princess fantasy, both as an icon of luxury, glamour and privilege, and as a “princess of democracy” who receives the jeweled crown through an open competition rather than through marriage or succession, symbolizing self-achievement and a sense of agency within the romantic frame of the shōjo-scape.⁵⁷

The ballerina represents an attainable, democratic version of the princess, and this vision has been retained in popular culture like shōjo manga. Classical ballet with its association with fairy tale narratives, tiaras, and delicate flower-like dresses could function as an obvious instrument for young people to indulge themselves in this princess fantasy.⁵⁸ Likewise, as Pat Kirkham has pointed out in her analysis of dress in Charles Crichton’s film *Dance Hall* (1950), a classical ballroom gown-like “dream dress” is symbolic of an elegant, romantic mode of femininity.⁵⁹ By wearing it, the female character and the (female) viewer alike can experience the transcendence of fairy tale-like fantasy into reality when such a mode of femininity is largely unavailable in their everyday lives. The ballet skirt and a pair of ribbon, satin pointe shoes offer a very similar effect. Balletic heroines with their gauzy, cascading skirts, are symbolic of girlish femininity, which can easily be translated into Japanese culture as a metonymy of the shōjo image.

The ballerina and shōjo are closely related not only sartorially, but also thematically. After all, many of the heroines in classical ballet repertoires, from *La Sylphide* and *The Swan Lake* through *The Nutcracker* to *Cinderella*, are innocent maidens, fairies and princesses. As Meredith Jones articulates, the fascination with fairy tales like Charles Perrault's *The Sleeping Beauty* (*La Belle au Bois Dormant*) lies in the live embalming of a beautiful maiden whose beauty and youth, and by implication girlish femininity, is preserved while being in a state of physical imprisonment.⁶⁰ Other characters include spirits and maidens, whose ethereal, delicate existences are technically conveyed through the lightness of gauzy ballet dresses, and who perish when their virtues are under threat (e.g. *Sylphide*, *Giselle*). Thus, the feminine figures whom the romantic ballerina embodies on the stage are, arguably, dwelling in a dreamy, imaginative space of liminality between childhood and womanhood: a shōjo-scape.

In the Romantic period certain female ballet dancers, while they were not immune from being sexually objectified, embodied the image of a dream woman and thereby men's appraisal of such "ethereal" dancers could be similar to an act of worship.⁶¹ The nineteenth-century poet, writer and art critic Théophile Gautier perceived some of the qualities of ballerinas as the "modest grace, chaste reserve, and diaphanous virginity"⁶² of the Taglioni school.⁶³ Art historian Evan Alderson writes on romantic ballerinas such as the legendary Marie Taglioni (1804 – 1884) that "the erotic is given and yet simultaneously denied" because "female sexual feeling is deflected toward innocence and virtue, but this virtue both invites victimization and triumphs through it."⁶⁴ Given cultural, contextual and historical differences, making simplistic comparisons should be avoided. However, I argue that this perception of the ballerina is remarkably similar to Honda's conceptualization of the shōjo, whose dress both accentuates (innocent) femininity and denies (mature) womanhood.

As we have seen, such key concepts as *kawaii*, ballerinas, and princesses tend to formulate qualities that associate with the aesthetic and conceptual image of *shōjo*. One fashion label that unites all of these is Milk, which was launched in 1970 by Hitomi and has remained an active and iconic women's fashion brand for nearly half a century.

Milk: Dresses of the Dreams of Shōjo

Milk's garments are edgy yet girlish, romantic and dreamy. Catalogues of the brand offer garments that are full above-calf-length skirts, or dresses in pastel shades, adorned with colorful patterns, laces, frills, and ribbons.⁶⁵ The look is completed with ankle-length frilly white socks or above-knee socks and heeled Mary Jane shoes. The ballerina and Alice seem to be favorite icons, as in addition to the Tutu-donna dress, Milk offers a frilly tulle babydoll dress called "Nightmare Tutu Dress" (2014) and the ballet-inspired "Red Shoes Dress" (2016) as well as numerous Alice-motif items like a long-sleeved above-knee dress with playing card patterns named "Nightmare Alice Dress" (2014 – 2015). As early as 1973, Milk's puff-sleeve blouse and lacy tiered skirt were styled as "being Alice in Wonderland,"⁶⁶ and its rhinestone tiara was featured as a main item in creating a ballerina-princess look.⁶⁷ These garments craft a *kawaii*, *shōjo* "look" that resembles the beautiful designs and images of a girl Nakahara Jun'ichi has depicted in his art, which, as previously mentioned is an embodiment of *shōjo*.

Milk was launched with the initial concept of "dreams of *shōjo*" (*shōjo no yume*), and is still located in the district of Harajuku in Tokyo, now famous as one of the areas in Japan where the most colorful and innovative fashions are found. From its initial collections, the brand was known for offering *kawaii* and girlish fashion, with the old-world charm of lace and ribbons as well as ballet shoes.⁶⁸ Milk also has strong ties with Japanese female idols—another epitome of *shōjo*—frequently offering costumes for

them, beginning with Amachi Mari in the early 1970s. Amachi is often heralded as the first female “pop idol” (*aidoru*) in the history of the contemporary Japanese music industry, and is also known as “Snow White.” The history of Milk’s association with idols continued with Amachi’s contemporary Minami Saori “teen idol” Candies, Matsuda Seiko and Koizumi Kyōko in the 1980s, through Michishige Sayumi in the twenty-first century.⁶⁹

Pop idols in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s were symbolic of a “Miss Sweet and Innocent” image, balancing both the allure of privilege (as exemplified by stardom and celebrity worship) and familiarity. Stephen Gundle writes in his book *Glamour* that in the context of an expanding commercial culture, glamour, like fashion, contained the promise, a fantasy that anyone could reach out to it.⁷⁰ Likewise, pop idols of this era endorsed the idea that “anyone can be a star,” created by such star search TV programs as *Star Tanjō* (*A Star is Born*) or weekly music shows like *Best Ten*.⁷¹ While this negotiation between the senses of privilege and familiarity corresponded with the essence of the princess fantasy that I have mentioned earlier, the regalia of female idols, although not completely uniform, were often described as frilly or lacy ballerina-like dresses of pastel shades, connoting innocent, shōjo femininity as well as artificiality.⁷²

Milk has been frequented by Vivienne Westwood and was the first shop in Japan to sell *Comme des Garçons*, which attests to the innovative and edgy approach Milk has, despite its hyperbolically cute and girlish image.⁷³ Significantly, Milk’s conception of romantic, *kawaii* shōjo fashion aesthetics also underscores an analogy between shōjo and princess, an archetypal girlish concept as we have seen. In a magazine spread dedicated to Milk and its male line Milkboy (est. 1974), Hitomi says that Milk is worn by girls who want to be princesses, and “my duty is to lead girls to have a sweet life, so they won’t eat a black poisonous apple.”⁷⁴

Here we should consider the symbolism of the princess. In contemporary Anglophone culture the concept of the princess is often derogatory due to the assumed passivity and docility ascribed to the role.⁷⁵ If the apparent compliance of the princess is due to her role as a damsel-in-distress waiting for her “knight on a white charger” to rescue and marry her, the connotation of the “princess” in our contemporary imagination of the fairy tale is only complete when it is paired with the prince. In other words, the identity of the princess is defined and emphasized through her position as the object of the romantic affection of the prince. As a result, the princess cannot exist without the prince, and hence her identity becomes dependent: a symbol of complicity and passivity.⁷⁶ This view echoes some of the widespread negative reading of women’s fashion, notably that women’s fashion first and foremost serves to incite the objectifying male gaze and desire. While seemingly anachronistic, this view asserts that fashion or looks that connote “femininity” are passive and unfavorable.

While there might be different readings of Hitomi’s fashion philosophy, one thing that seems certain is that a degree of independence is attached to the concept of princess in contemporary Japanese culture. For example, the types of princesses in the 1950s that accompanied the “princess boom,” as Jan Bardsley’s studies of Miss Universe indicate, were more like “princesses of democracy,” crowned “through open competition” both nationally and internationally, embodying literal and social mobility as well as international celebrity status.⁷⁷ This subtle inversion of “passivity” into individual agency is still evident in contemporary Japanese culture, where the fairy tale of *Cinderella*, which has frequently been coded as symbolic of passive femininity in Anglophone culture, is instead interpreted as “a strong message of self-transformation and individual achievement in the Japanese setting.”⁷⁸

That is not to say that romance is unnecessary for those who dress in such girlish fashions. Irrespective of gender and age people dress for different reasons at different times, sometimes for an occasion, sometimes for attracting and pleasing admirers, for their own pleasure, or for necessity.⁷⁹ Hitomi does not disregard or refute such desires.⁸⁰ But what is significant is the apparent separation of the imagination of the princess from the romantic object of the prince. For this reason, the princess and the qualities of shōjo aesthetic associated with her are given a sense of independence and autonomy. Importantly, theories articulated in fashion studies by Bonnie G. Smith and Steele have argued that rather than merely being symbolic of feminine oppression and objectification, highly “feminine” dresses (in their studies, those in nineteenth-century upper-class Europe) often reflect the choices and autonomy of the wearers.⁸¹ Milk and its straightforward appreciation of highly shōjo and *kawaii* styles renders this argument more convincing. Milk’s dresses, and by implication the shōjo look of their wearers, do not, therefore, necessarily have to be read as symbolic of female passivity.

Indeed, the concept of *kawaii* (and by implication girly girl or shōjo) as exemplified by Hitomi is neither passive nor weak.⁸² It is striking that Milk integrated *kawaii* shōjo fashion aesthetics with their emphasis on sweetness without overly emphasizing sexual allure. “Milk clothes were—and continue to be—girly, romantic, and feminine but not sexual. All these elements are the base for what would later become *kawaii* culture,” writes Tiffany Godoy in her book dedicated to Japanese street fashion cultures.⁸³ This point corresponds with the aforementioned traits of shōjo as highly girlish yet asexual, and shōjo fashion displaying girlish femininity yet concealing physical (and by implication sexual) womanliness. In addition, as the magazine-book dedicated to Milk in 2011 says, “sparkling girls will change the world,” which means

that girls have the potential to “save” the world, as *shōjo* and their aesthetics have a power to make people feel happy.⁸⁴

Milk’s recognition and straightforward appraisal of the power of such aesthetic concepts as girlish qualities is highly significant. This is because when associated with women’s appearance, behaviour and fashion, girlish cuteness faces the possibility of being deemed as endorsing asymmetrical gender relations. These views posit that women are evaluated and judged within the concept of *kawaii*, and are sexually commodified by being reduced to vulnerability, submissiveness, and immaturity.⁸⁵ Such criticism, while important, underestimates the complexity of aesthetic concepts like (girlish) beauty and cuteness. These can indeed be powerful.

The Sparkling and Puissant Princess: Shōjo Fashion and Empowerment

Milk’s hyperbolically *shōjo* fashion styles may appear to some to be endorsing a vulnerable, fragile, and passive mode of femininity. Yet those same aesthetics can also make those who prefer such styles feel comfortable, exultant, and empowered, giving them the strength to stand any affliction or unglamorous event that may occur in their everyday lives. This idea is further supported by the fact that what we wear affects how we feel and to some degree how we behave.⁸⁶ Irrespective of gender and age, dress strongly affects and influences our physical and psychological senses, notably confidence and pleasure.⁸⁷ The detachment of sexuality from *shōjo* fashion, then, may allow the wearer to appreciate girlish femininity without being much constrained from social trammels that are likely attached to “womanhood” or “maturity.”

Arguably, Milk’s fashion philosophy delineates a complex subject position of the *shōjo* in contemporary Japanese culture, subtly inhabiting the middle space of a set of continuums; fragility and vigorousness, sexualized and modest femininities, and

childlike-naivety and mature womanhood. It should be noted that a range of fashion styles that evoke different kinds of *shōjo* images may exist on the extent to question whether or not such images are male oriented/objectified or female maneuvered. Yet, it seems clear that if we can speak at all of the *shōjo* fashion and concepts this chapter investigated, it subverts, even if temporarily, the stereotyped and often derogatory views assigned to girlish femininity, and instead allows young women to celebrate a sense of autonomy. In this sense, *shōjo* fashion as epitomized by Milk, and influenced by such romantic, maidenly figures like Alice and the ballerina, gives prominence to the power and significance of what are conventionally regarded as “girlish” or *shōjo* aesthetic.

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⁵ Helen Kilpatrick, “Envisioning the Shōjo Aesthetic in Miyazawa Kenji’s ‘The Twin Stars’ and ‘Night of the Milky Way Railway,’” *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 9, 3 (2012): 3; see also Masafumi Monden, “Layers of the Ethereal,” *Fashion Theory*, 18, 3 (2014): 251–296.

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⁷ Sarah Frederick, “Not That Innocent: Yoshiya Nobuko’s Good Girls,” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, eds. L. Miller and J. Bardsley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 68.

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¹¹ Valerie Steele, *Japan Fashion Now* (New York: Yale University Press, 2010), 48; Masafumi Monden, *Japanese Fashion Cultures: Gender and Dress in Contemporary Japan* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 116.

¹² Monden, *Japanese Fashion Cultures*, 126.

¹³ James Welker, "From The Cherry Orchard to Sakura no sono: Translation and the Transfiguration of Gender and Sexuality in Shōjo Manga," in *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*, eds. T. Aoyama and B. Hartley (New York: Routledge, 2010), 168. See also Honda, "'The Genealogy of Hirahira,'" 34.

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- ¹⁸ Imada Erika, *Shōjo no shakaishi* [A social history of the shōjo], (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 2007); Watanabe, *Shōjo*, 2007; Kawasaki, “Osaki Midori and the Role of the Girl in Shōwa Modernism”: 294; Aoyama and Hartley, *Girl Reading Girl in Japan*.
- ¹⁹ Iwashita Hōsei, “Sutairu-ga to sutairu” [Style illustrations and styles] *Eureka*, 637, 45-16 (2013): 195- 202; Kayoko Kuramochi, “Nakahara Jun’ichi to shōjo manga” [Shōjo manga and Jun’ichi Nakahara], *Eureka*, 637, 45-16 (2013): 203- 210.
- ²⁰ *Utsukushiku ikiru: Nakahara Jun’ichi sono bigaku to shigoto* [Live Beautifully: The Aesthetics and Works of Jun’ichi Nakahara] (Tokyo: Heibon-sha, 1999), 40, 45, and 54.
- ²¹ Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase, “Kawabata’s Wartime Message in Beautiful Voyage (Utsukushii tabi),” in *Negotiating Censorship in Modern Japan*, ed. R. Hutchinson (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 80.
- ²² Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B Eicher, “Dress and Identity,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 11, no. 1 (1992): 1.
- ²³ Valerie Steele, “Letter from the Editor,” *Fashion Theory*, 1, 1 (1997): 1.
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- ²⁶ Davis, *Culture and Identity*, 8.
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- ²⁸ For more references to the popularity of Alice in Japanese popular culture, see Masafumi Monden, “Being Alice in Japan: Performing a Cute, ‘Girlish’ Revolt,” *Japan Forum*, 26, 2 (2014): 265-285.

²⁹ *Olive*, “Yumemiru kisetsu, fushigi no kuni no Arisu ni naritai na [I want to be Alice in Wonderland in this dreamy season], February 18 (1985): 72-3.

³⁰ *Sō-En*, “Arisu wo sagashite” [Looking for Alice], October (2007): 26.

³¹ Jo Elwyn Jones and Francis J. Gladstone, *The Alice Companion: A Guide to Lewis Carroll’s Alice Books* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 75; Will Brooker, *Alice’s Adventures* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005). 100.

³² Watanabe Shūko, *Shōjo-zō no tanjō—kindai Nihon ni okeru “shōjo” no keisei* [The Birth of the Images of Shōjo—The Construction of Shōjo in Modern Japan] (Tokyo: Shinsen-sha, 2007), 271.

³³ Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 104.

³⁴ Brooker, *Alice’s Adventures*, 105. Disney’s *Alice* is first released in Japan in 1952.

³⁵ Elizabeth Ewing, *History of Children’s Costume* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1977), 97.

³⁶ Clare Rose, *Children’s Clothes Since 1750* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1989), 126-7.

³⁷ For Emily’s intake of *Alice*, see Monden Japanese Fashion Cultures, 87.

³⁸ Honda Masuko, *Ofiiria no keifu: arui wa, shi to otome no tawamure* [The genealogy of Ophelia]. (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1989), 86.

³⁹ Honda, *Ofiiria*, 86.

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⁴³ *non-no*, Vol. 15-6 (2010): 22; 48-9.

⁴⁴ *non-no*, January issue (2016): 50-54.

⁴⁵ Masafumi Monden, "In Praise of Sheer Perfection: Ballet, Clothing and Japanese Culture," in *Dance and Fashion*, ed. V Steele (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 309-51.

⁴⁶ Judith Chazin-Bennahum, *The Lure of Perfection: Fashion and Ballet, 1780–1830* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 192.

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⁴⁸ Peter McNeil, "The Appearance of Enlightenment: Refashioning the Elites," in *The Enlightenment World*, eds. M. Fitzpatrick, P. Jones, C. Knellwolf and I. McCalmn (Oxfordshire and New York: Routledge, 2004), 395. Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*, 172.

⁴⁹ Ewing *History of Children's Costume*, 94.

⁵⁰ Chazin-Bennahum, *The Lure of Perfection*, 238.

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- ⁵⁴ E.g. *Olive*, May 3 issue (1986): 77-76; March 18 issue (1988): 35-41.
- ⁵⁵ For example, February 2016: 76; May 2015, pp. 18-31, 38-43, 60-63.
- ⁵⁶ See Masafumi Monden, "Layers of the Ethereal"; Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jan Bardsley, "Girl Royalty: The 1959 Coronation of Japan's First Miss Universe," *Asian Studies Review*, 32, 3 (2008): 375-91; Jan Bardsley, "Miss Japan on the Global Stage: The Journey of Itō Kinuko," in *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility and Labor in Japan*, eds. A. Freedman, L. Miller, and C. R. Yano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 169-92; Michael Furmanovsky, "A Complex Fit," *Kokusai bunka kenkyu* 16 (2012): 55.
- ⁵⁷ Monden "Layers of the Ethereal": 274-8.
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- ⁶³ Gautier, *The Romantic Ballet*, 16.
- ⁶⁴ Evan Alderson, "Ballet as Ideology: Giselle, Act II," *Dance Chronicle*, 10, 3 (1986): 295-6.
- ⁶⁵ Milk. "Look Book." Last accessed 30 January, 2015. <http://www.milk-web.net>.

⁶⁶ *An an*, May 20 issue (1973), 207.

⁶⁷ *Olive*, March 18 issue (1988): 38.

⁶⁸ Milk, *e-Mook: Sparkling Girls Change the World* (Tokyo: Takarajima-sha, 2011), 12. *non-no*, April 20 issue (1973), p. 148.

⁶⁹ Milk, *Sparkling Girls*, 12-3. Its male line Milkboy (est. 1974) also offered costumes for male idols and performers such as Hikaru Genji, Unicorn, and The Checkers in the 1980s. Kenji Hiraoka, *History of Milkboy* (email-correspondence, 1 October, 2013 unpublished).

⁷⁰ Gundle, *Glamour*, 7.

⁷¹ Carolyn Stevens and Shuhei Hosokawa, "So Close and yet So Far: Humanizing Celebrity in Japanese Music Variety Shows, 1960-1990s," in *Asian Media Productions*, ed. B. Moeran (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2001), 227-31.

⁷² Kyoko Koizumi, *Panda no An-An* (Tokyo: Magazine House, 1997), 112–13.

⁷³ Tiffany Godoy, *Style Deficient Disorder: Harajuku Street Fashion Tokyo* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), 37.

⁷⁴ *spoon*, September, vol. 95 (2013): 29.

⁷⁵ Samantha Holland, *Alternative Femininities: Body, Age and Identity* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 58.

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⁷⁷ Bardsley, "Miss Japan on the Global Stage," 185.

⁷⁸ Laura Miller "Japan's Cinderella Motif: Beauty Industry and Mass Culture Interpretations of a Popular Icon." *Asian Studies Review*, 32, 3 (2008): 393.

⁷⁹ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 247; Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press. 2000), 186.

⁸⁰ *spoon.*, December, vol. 97 (2013), 31.

⁸¹ B. G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*.

⁸² Godoy, *Style*, 37. Harajuku is a district in Shibuya ward in Tokyo prefecture, which has become known for youth fashion subcultures.

⁸³ Godoy, *Style*, 38.

⁸⁴ Milk, *Sparkling Girls*, 1.

⁸⁵ See, for example: Koga Reiko, *Kawaii no teikoku* [The Empire of Kawaii] (Tokyo: Seido-sha, 2009), 206–7; Kimiko Akita, “Cuteness: The Sexual Commodification of Women in the Japanese Media,” in *Women and the Media*, eds. T. Carilli and J. Campbell (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005), 44–57.

⁸⁶ Julia Twigg, *Fashion and age: Dress, the Body and Later Life* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 22.

⁸⁷ Steele 1985, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 247; Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 186; Monden, *Japanese Fashion Cultures*.