

# THE REAL HAPPY FAMILY: JAPANESE MORNING SERIAL DRAMA AND ITS FANS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers Japanese morning serial television drama (*renzoku terebi shōsetsu* or *asadora*) from public broadcaster NHK and the ways that audiences write back to the shows. It samples amateur fans' blogs and fanfiction, along with professional journalism treating programs aired from 2005 to 2017. As *Asadora* present an ideal happy family centered on women who sacrifice, the paper asks not only how viewers receive *asadora*, but whether shows accommodate viewers' responses. Is there potential for change? De Kosnik has theorized that the internet allows women to challenge outdated norms. Yet Japanese viewers are apt to reject non-traditional images. Who are these viewers, and is their reception gendered? Drawing on fanfiction studies, the paper argues that audiences seek not to change the world, but to find pleasure in it, and in their shared fandom, through repeating content and engaging in simulated exchanges.

**KEY WORDS:** ASADORA – JAPANESE TELEVISION – SERIAL DRAMA – FANFICTION – FAN BLOGS

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'intéresse à la réception du feuilleton télévisé japonais du matin (*asadora*) diffusé par la chaîne publique NHK. Il examine les blogs des amateurs et les fanfictions liés à cet objet culturel, tout en prenant en considération son traitement médiatique et les discours qu'il a pu susciter de la part de journalistes professionnels entre 2005 et 2017. Comme les *asadora* mettent à l'écran une famille idéale et heureuse dont l'équilibre repose sur des femmes prêtes à se sacrifier, l'article ne se demande pas seulement quelle réception le public se fait de ce feuilleton matinal, mais cherche également à déterminer si celui-ci est susceptible de s'adapter aux réactions et aux réponses des téléspectateurs/trices : les représentations peuvent-elles évoluer en fonction de la réception ? De Kosnik a théorisé la manière dont Internet permet aux femmes de remettre en cause et de défier des normes sociales obsolètes. Pourtant, les téléspectateurs/trices japonais-es sont susceptibles à certains égards de rejeter les représentations non traditionnelles. Qui forme donc le public du feuilleton ? Sa réception est-elle marquée par des mécanismes

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers who usefully called for clarification on several major points.

générés ? S'appuyant sur les études dédiées aux fanfictions, l'article soutient que le public des *asadora* ne recherche pas un bouleversement des valeurs établies mais trouve du plaisir dans leur maintien, ainsi que dans les échanges virtuels tissés par une communauté unie autour de la répétition de ce contenu sériel.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** ASADORA – TELEVISION JAPONAISE – FEUILLETON  
TELEVISÉ – FANFICTION – BLOGS DE FANS

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What gets you up in the morning? What motivates you to even think there is a morning under our conditions of late capitalism and intense media saturation? In Japan, some say it is the fifteen-minute tele-drama that airs six days a week, the *renzoku terebi shōsetsu*, or “continuing television novel”, familiarly known as the *asadora* (*asa* for “morning”, currently 8 a.m., *dora* for “drama”)<sup>2</sup>. Timed to reward the housewife for successfully hustling household members off to work or school, these programs mix female coming-of-age stories with a vision of the joys that nation-minded consumption and reproduction bring. Not surprising, since they come from public broadcaster NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan Broadcasting Association). The heroine (*hiroin*) is typically bright and indefatigable; her appeal to the opposite sex manifested only by a long-suffering pal from childhood. Her generally buoyant trajectory from uncertain youth to trial-tempered adult pleases and inspires. She may be a baker or a carpenter, but family carries her through.

Every six months, a new program begins, perhaps set in a different era or locale, and viewers restart the process of bonding with and rooting for an individual woman’s bliss. So it is now and so it has been for most years since 1961, with a viewership that peaked at 52.6 % in 1983, and did not fall below 20 % until 2003 (Nihei, 2016: 2). Today, when the ninety-seventh eighth series is on the air, the numbers have recovered, with ratings as high as an average 23.5 % for a recent entry, *Asa ga kita* (*Sunshiny Asa*, September 2015-April 2016). The *asadora* merits a status of fixture and the moniker “national drama” (*kokuminteki na dorama*) that frequently appears in discussions of it. Shows represent women of all generations as they ought to be; viewers, according to this common discourse, are passive recipients of pro-state modeling.

Something, however, has changed. As the electronic hearth has shifted from a small television ensconced centrally in the kitchen or parlor to a virtual

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<sup>2</sup> Yoshimi Shunya points to TV programs as creators of the sense of time in the modern world: “It is impossible to say for sure whether people watch the NHK news because the time is 7p.m. or whether the time 7p.m. itself exists for people as the experience of watching the NHK news” (Yoshimi, 2003: 477).

circle of like-minded, online fans, whose engagement lasts beyond the brief air time, women – as well as other, less expected fans – are increasingly talking back to the screen. These are not simply the mutterings, laughter, or tears of an audience member who actively enjoys the show, nor even the negative reflex of an unhappy viewer who switches off the set and reduces the ratings a program earns. These are written responses on the web and in print, aimed directly at the content and its producers. Have they spurred a dialogue? Or is there only the appearance of an interchange? If there is give-and-take, is it gendered, and in what direction, if any, is it moving the medium? In probing this new context, I will bear in mind two subsidiary questions: first, is “movement” even necessary to viewer-participants, and second, what are the stakes of a gendered renegotiation of *asadora*<sup>3</sup>? In other words, what do women make of the *asadora* and what does a series make of women and family?

Studies of *asadora* have lately shifted focus to audience response, often based on survey analysis<sup>4</sup>. They produce valuable data, but cannot sufficiently account for the vectors of expectation and reaction on both viewers’ and producers’ sides. My approach is consequently qualitative, with reading in two dozen popular blogs and numerous samples of more traditional print media treating just over half of twenty-five series from 2005 to 2017. I view each instance of reception as a rhetorical site where language is as significant as content; the insights of fanfiction suggest that play also matters. In this perspective, let us examine some propositions for the effects of audience reception on televisual materials before detailing voices.

## **TO CHANGE OR NOT TO CHANGE?**

Early on media theorists proposed that the internet could offer a zone of democratization in which at the very least viewers might nudge programming

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, I decided to favor imprecise notions such as “movement” rather than the clearer but teleological idea of “progress”.

<sup>4</sup> NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute (*NHK hōsō bunka kenkyūjō*) first reported on its project to explain the recent appeal of *asadora* through survey research in March 2016. Nihei et Sekiguchi, 2016. Publications on individual programs continue biannually, as in Nihei, 2016. These expand on a strong heritage of research into content, audience manipulation, and global viewership. Western studies of fans and media do not generally look at this unfamiliar genre.

to be less dismissive or stereotypical, leading to a more inclusive representation of viewing groups<sup>5</sup>. In a dialogue with producers, it seems likely that women could shape the way these programs picture their possibilities. By challenging stale depictions of gender in society, they might find themselves in new territories separate from the dominant template of the heterosexual family. In its most radical version, embracing what Abigail De Kosnik calls “cyberutopian hopes”, the web could become a site for the creation of alternative subjectivities, particularly through appropriations of the mainstream that encode the heretofore underrepresented (De Kosnik, 2016: 12). Such a breakthrough could not come soon enough for Japan, which finds itself languishing as one of the least gender-fair societies<sup>6</sup>. In 1999 the Japanese legislature passed the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society, “gender equal” being the official translation of “male-female joint participation”, a condition that politicians hoped would stem from “equality of opportunity” (Kano, 2016: 142). More recently the government has sought to advance a vision of gender neutrality that could enable effective exploitation of women’s power in the economy, something that the current prime minister, Abe Shinzō, has promoted under the seemingly daring label “womenomics”<sup>7</sup>. The *asadora* is well suited, given its characteristic focus on career women and their path-breaking activities, to function as a site for new images and narratives, especially with a push from audiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Ess relates how the internet has failed to deliver the kind of utopian emancipation that some feminists foresaw, yet can still be a factor in desirable social change (Ess, 2018). Katherine Cross embeds a review of feminist u/dystopian thinking, represented by Donna Haraway and Lisa Nakamura, in her optimistic account of gameplay virtuality as a venue for new possibilities (Cross, 2012: 70-71). See also Anne Kustritz for case studies of fans creating “impossible” futures grounded in desire (Kustritz, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> In 2016, Japan ranked 111<sup>th</sup> out of 144 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index. Since it ranks very well in “health and survival” and “educational attainment”, Japan’s scores for “economic participation and opportunity” and “political empowerment” of women are especially out of balance. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/rankings/>, accessed 4.31.2017. My thanks to Mark Bookman for alerting me to the latest report, which shows that Japan has fallen further, to 114<sup>th</sup> (with slight gains on the economic front). <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2017/dataexplorer/#economy=JPN>, accessed 11.5.2017.

<sup>7</sup> Abe attracted attention in September 2013 and January 2014 for international speeches positing womenomics “as the key to Japan’s recovery of national strength. He pledged to create an environment in which women could work and be active in society” (Kano, 2016: 169).

Such change is far from guaranteed, however. It is just as logical that viewers could reiterate and become implicated in the gendered assumptions that underlie the series. The shows themselves seek to please and flatter, dilating upon every piece of emotional catnip that the carefully crafted and slowly unfolded stories can supply. Cameras zoom in on the joys of the aspirational life, whether expressed through the acquisition of desirable comforts – washing machines, refrigerators, and television sets for shows set in the 1950s<sup>8</sup>, for example – or the noble deprivation that people today might learn to endure together with the help of nostalgic trappings. Whether a given drama takes place in the 1890s or 2008, cheerful wives, adorable children, and of course attractive men literally put the best possible face on the nuclear or extended family when they step in and step up to their responsibilities. A fair amount of the action, or more properly reflection on the action, is set in the *chanoma*, the “tea room”, a type of living room that in many Japanese homes overlaps with the dining area. The *chanoma* is what NHK claims to be broadcasting toward, and it is also supposed to be where the family shares its comments on the day’s episode over cups of brewed green tea<sup>9</sup>. It offers a powerful image of togetherness, especially in this day when much of the tea consumed in Japan comes in PET bottles from a convenience store or vending machine.

The affective rewards of following the programs into their normative, insular, recapture-the-past scenarios strongly reinforce a myth of happy, domesticated womanhood the state has shaped with media help since the late nineteenth century birth of Japanese modernity. Although the postwar notion of women’s life course in Japan – work for a few years after graduation, perhaps serving tea in a company, quit the workplace to have a child, ideally by about thirty-five, raise children full time, then go back to work, typically part time,

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<sup>8</sup> These are the so-called *sanshu no jingi*, the three sacred treasures, named after the symbols of imperial authority (mirror, sword, and jewel). NHK occasionally introduces a ringer into such historical configurations, perhaps to maintain the attitude that these are fictions, and in the *Toto-nee-chan* “memorial book” we see a toaster taking the place of the washing machine (NHK Saabisu sentaa, 2016: 10).

<sup>9</sup> *Chanoma* was the locus used to distinguish movies from television in the early days, and became an institution at NHK (Matsuyama, 2013). In the general view, the days of watching TV together in the parlor are over, but surveys note a revival beginning in about 2010 (Okuda, 2010), and NHK announcers still use the word.

once they are grown (Brinton, 1993: 28-32) – has morphed over time, it has regained popularity in this century among conservative politicians and social critics thanks to the low Japanese birthrate (it currently hovers around 1.4 instead of the government’s goal of 1.8). A girl should seek a good marriage partner to facilitate founding a contented family, and viewers can count on the *asadora* to present at least one wedding each season. Even when the central character is a mold-breaker, she tends to pursue a narrow path to personal fulfillment, and to express anxiety when obstacles to conventional timing interfere. The same happens in the edgier evening dramas. Freedman and Iwata-Weickgennant have shown that the 10:00 p.m. drama *Around 40* (2008) offers women of a certain age who put off childbearing in favor of career “... a greater variety of ways they can find happiness in the changed sociopolitical climate of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japan; yet it reaffirms the belief that it is impossible for women to both pursue full-time careers and be mothers” (Freedman et Iwata-Weickgenannt, 2011: 297). Self-sacrifice is a frequent trope at both ends of the day.

Although the *Around 40* phenomenon is a decade behind us now, it may be said to represent the current state of an older conversation. In 1985, the Japanese parliament passed the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL), which tried to negotiate between opening paths for promotion and professionalization for women and protecting their right to certain accommodations related to their child-bearing capacity. This is a long-standing debate in Japan, where motherhood-friendly feminism has sought to improve conditions for working mothers as well as wax positive about the value of raising children for those who pursue it exclusively (Kano, 2016: 132-34). In practice the EEOL has not resulted in substantial gains of women in management, since companies are allowed to require women to commit to a management or a clerical track at the start of employment. The *asadora* has not tended to look at women in careers that force this real-world choice, however, since the more usual scenario is of a woman who sets out to make her way in entertainment or another “dream” occupation, who builds something unprecedented from the

ground up, or who inherits the family trade. In that sense, the *asadora* has stayed outside a main arena of the working-woman question, diluting any conversation that could arise around this issue.

In sum, we might imagine that fan feedback could change the depiction of women, or that viewers could accept the portraits that NHK provides. This way of putting it, however, implies that either NHK or the audience will shift, and only in one direction. *Asadora* followers comprise a complex set of viewers, response strategies, and motivations. Signs of viewer reception are encoded in many kinds of evidence. Voices include industry insiders and professional critics who are themselves engaged in or benefitted by the success of the programs, and amateurs, that is, those who are not (as) actively involved in marketing *asadora* to the public. Nor are the two always distinguishable. There is a fine line between the author who seeks sales of a book on the genre and the blogger who competes informally to earn more followers, but as a starting premise, I assume that print publication and NHK's own outlets are inclined to favor the *status quo*<sup>10</sup>. It is however not my purpose to analyze here the contrasts in the functions of older and newer forms of writing, important as those may be. Fans are likely to experience the appeal of the programs, research on soap operas indicates, as interpersonal (Baym, 2000: 11). Their choices to engage other viewers with blogs and Twitter feeds indicates that they recognize communication as a way in and of itself to enhance their enjoyment. Many blogs invoke the language of “support” (*ōen*), which is also used by sports fans, and suggests that their writers consider themselves part of a useful communal project. Active audiences who seek more joy may not focus on change after all. With this in mind, let us look at how they create gender identities for themselves and the characters they follow.

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<sup>10</sup> Although it should be noted that NHK does not actually have a department dedicated exclusively to the *asadora* form or formulae (Takō, 2012: 216), NHK studies the *asadora* methodically and publishes factors in maintaining morning drama viewership in its journal *Hōsō kenkyū to chōsa* (*The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research*), now on the web.

## WHO WANTS A HAPPY FAMILY?

One difficulty in judging the gendered force of the *asadora* arises from the determination of NHK to attract numbers, which leads to a relatively high level of innovation for a genre whose basic outlines seem set. *Kaaneeshon* (“Carnation”, October 2011–March 2012) marked a turning point for the *asadora* because it drew viewers of a wider range than usual, both male and female (Shimoji, 2013: 51). The lead, Itoko, who is modeled on Koshino Ayako, mother of three successful sisters, including the internationally known designer Koshino Junko, is stubbornly focused on her career desires. She refuses from childhood to accept limitations on girls (a point dramatized by her wish to ride on a festival float in a macho parade), and the audience even learns that her husband has cheated on her. For a *coup de grâce*, Itoko herself falls in love with someone she is not married to, straying far outside the customary lines of what NHK would show in the morning. It seems surprising, then, that Takō Wakako, who opines that *asadora* are “the essence of the happy family” (Takō, 2012: 15; 298) in her book *Taisetsu na koto wa minna asadora ga oshiete kureta* [“Everything that matters the morning dramas taught me”], would choose this as her chief example of a perfectly-made *asadora*. Takō presumably knows of what she speaks, since she is a former print and broadcast journalist active on a website dedicated to “family theater”. Her praise for this series picks out its crisp pacing, excellent acting, and seasoned script, but she also notes that the lover characters ad-libbed on the set and carried on a Twitter war in colloquial speech (Takō, 2012: 22–25; 47). Even as she lauds aspects that hook in the viewer, when discussing the role of *asadora* more generally she ignores the heroine’s transgressions. Takō’s broader reminiscences are of a multi-generational household enjoying the show together over breakfast (Takō, 2012: 210-11), families that watch “families” gathered around the dining table (Takō, 2012: 153).

What is this “essence of the happy family” then, if, as Takō’s choices imply, it can embrace ambivalent versions of womanhood, and even dispense with the kind of self-sacrifice that has routinely kept the Japanese family going?

Perhaps, as Alexandra Hambleton argues, consumption is the most important metric in the portrayal of women on Japanese television, and even errant sexuality is permitted provided that consumer ideology remains central (Hambleton, 2012: 125-26). *Kaaneeshon* may be the exception that reinforces the rule of the ordinary monogamous unit. *Asa ga kita* was the first series to dip back before the mid-nineteenth century, a novelty that was heavily promoted. Some praised the script for not introducing the historically accurate detail that Asa's spouse took a concubine, on the grounds that it would be a little too dark first thing in the morning (Nihei, 2016: 10). Asa's penchant for sumo wrestling and striking out on her own in pursuit of business opportunities was subsumed under the characterization of "tomboy". As we see here, fans and creators alike are glad to relativize plot points that otherwise have the potential to present new images of women. Shimoji Kumiko concludes that the view that a happy (read traditional) family is a good thing was created by the makers and viewers of the *asadora* working in tandem. For her their rejection of the storyline in *Jun to Ai* (Jun and Ai, October 2012-March 2013), which featured a husband who played housewife full time, was emblematic of this collaboration (Shimoji, 2013: 52). The vast majority of *asadora* deliver what is expected, and the audience supports it. Only with incredibly strong writing and acting, such as the exceptional *Carnation*, can a show run viewers off the rail of monogamous heterosexual family life.

It stands to reason that the typical *asadora* fan, who grew up in the period of high economic growth, would favor tradition. It is also possible, though, that even the young have not yet abandoned hope for eventually settling down in a family that resembles the *asadora* template. Yamada Masahiro, who coined the phrase "parasite singles" in 1997 to describe youth who live at home even after they start working so that they can spend their income on leisure, claims that in interviews most women still tell him that they want to marry, have children, and engage in hobbies after their spouse retires (Yamada, 2013). To the extent that his interviewees know the opinions of the person to whom they are talking (that is, someone who would call them parasites if they expressed a desire to remain

single), there may be some filtering effect, but the ideal still has its appeal. In a survey of 4,000 men and women in their early twenties to late thirties, conducted in December 2015, 23.3 % of men and 16 % of women answered that they do not want to marry, but twice as many women (24.1 %) as men (12 %) said they want to marry soon. In a comparison with statistics gathered seven years earlier, the number who did not wish to marry had increased from 10.1 % to 17.8 % overall (National Institution for Youth Education, 2016: 2-3). The potential female audience for *asadora*, then, can be said to be losing its enthusiasm for marriage, but not as quickly as men are.

Sociologist Wada Yū has pointed out that researchers are so concerned to expose how media texts confirm existing norms in the age of gender backlash that we have not paid enough attention to concrete expressions in media of evolutionary consciousness. (Wada, 2006: 216-17) He analyzes *Kaze no Haruka* (October 2005-April 2006), which featured a father who left his salaried job in order to open a restaurant in the country and make more time with his children. Far from gender neutrality, however, the patriarch pushed his plan under such tired bromides as “when a man has a dream, the family supports it.” His wife wakes up to the fact that if she follows him into this new venture, she will lose a second chance at her own dreams. Choosing divorce, she pursues a career, while her ex-husband becomes the “housewife” (*shufu*). Within the narrative the heroine’s younger sister publishes a novel called *The Breaking of a Family*, which implies a kind of anger and sense of loss even as it shows a woman who succeeds free of these ties. The older daughter, in the meantime, emerges as substitute woman of the house and preserves the drive toward normative goals. For *Kaze no Haruka*, reversing the standard gender pattern of the modern nuclear unit via the husband-as-housewife motif delivers only a reshuffling of gendered functions up to this stage. Wada argues that the characters effect a reconstitution of “family” outside of traditional roles when the restaurant is reestablished with community help and when the divorced couple act as parents to their younger daughter, while praising the screenwriter, Ōmori Mika, for her sensitivity (Wada, 2006: 235–37). Wada takes this as a serious attempt to invent

new norms for an age when the old social contract of salaried men and full-time housewives evaporated. But low ratings of 17.5 % (admittedly during the decade when all shows fell below the 20 % barrier) suggest a failure to communicate with viewers. Was it a half-hearted effort to innovate that impeded a positive response? An online commentator complains among other things that the series did not take the issues seriously and gave a slap in the face to the economic struggles of the countryside<sup>11</sup>. Or was the problem that *Kaze no Haruka* did not effectively mobilize genre tropes, repetitions of which “figure centrally in our comprehension and pleasure” (Busse, 2009)? One blogger in her final review voices dismay at the lackluster happy ending of the heroine’s wedding<sup>12</sup>. Of late NHK seems to be devoting increasing resources to bringing on board the savviest teams to make sure there is always something new on offer, paired with cues that say “we know what you want”. *Kaze no Haruka* may have brought, as Wada writes, a new critique into 21<sup>st</sup> century *asadora* (Wada, 2006: 217), but it had evidently not yet worked out how to manage the interchange with its audience.

## **MATERIAL EXCHANGES AND REPRODUCTION**

Japan boasts a refined arsenal for motivating fandom. Japanese television has promoted a kind of interactivity for decades, as programming to encourage the public to consume, or to get out and explore the archipelago, has been a strong feature since the eighties at least. Programs that tout tourism are legion, from quiz shows to mysteries filmed in picturesque locales that highlight well-known attractions through the unfolding of plot points at those locations. NHK has been particularly cognizant of the need to represent its constituents by setting shows in tourable towns, east and west, coastal and mountainous, on and off the main island<sup>13</sup>. The vast majority of households pay the mandated

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<sup>11</sup> The review is signed “634” and gives the show the lowest rating. April 20, 2006. [https://sakuhindb.com/jdrama/7\\_KAZENO\\_20HARUKA/](https://sakuhindb.com/jdrama/7_KAZENO_20HARUKA/), accessed 10.30.2017

<sup>12</sup> “Maika’s This and That” [Maika no aa da, kō da], March 31, 2006, <https://plaza.rakuten.co.jp/maika888/diary/200603310001/> accessed 10.30.2017.

<sup>13</sup> The phenomenon of touring such sites is now known as *seichi junrei*, “pilgrimage to sacred places”. The new academic discipline “contents tourism” is devoted to studying it. See Philip

yearly subscription fee that underwrites NHK's programming budget, after all, and the largesse should be spread around. Viewers who follow the lead of these shows and make pilgrimages to sites produce intangible repertoires of "physical repetitions", in De Kosnik's sense (De Kosnik, 2016: 6-7). The press also talks up the prospects for visitors to *asadora* locations whenever possible. One media culture critic was puzzled at the setting of a series in Hamamatsu, which was not the actual birthplace of the model for the show, attributing the choice to efforts by each locale to draw NHK projects to them (Usui, 2016: n.p.). The city of Kuji in Iwate prefecture earned 9,065,000,000 yen from direct and indirect effects of the filming of *Amachan* (April-September 2013) (Tajima, 2016: 24), which was the first *asadora* to directly take up the events of March 11, 2011, the Triple Disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. This location was certainly part of NHK's bid to return value to the community.

Even when a magazine piece in the weekly *Ōa terebijon* ("The Television") focuses on the affective element of *Ohisama* (April-October 2011), photographs telegraph the setting in Nagano prefecture, which is enhanced with recipes for buckwheat noodles, famed in the area. The article presents information about the show in the guise of an interaction, crowing: "We asked 100 viewers who sob in the morning: 'This is why we like *Ohisama!*' ". The methodology involved asking for favorite scenes and characters, from which the writer then constructed a fully illustrated four-page spread charting the human relations that typify *asadora*. Tying for "favorite female character (*kyara*)" were the heroine "Yōko" and her mother-in-law "Tokuko". A text box with Yōko's picture remarks on her desire to keep teaching her young students after she gave birth by opening an evening classroom. Tokuko's explanatory box highlights the fact that she fell in love with Yōko at first sight and convinced the girl to meet her son as a potential marriage partner (a perfectly acceptable notion that the bride must be lovable, and the groom will eventually come to love her). Tokuko adores the daughter-in-law, whose mother died young, as though she were her own daughter. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the facing page calls Yōko's

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Seaton, Takayoshi Yamamura, Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, and Kyungjae Jang (2017), *Contents Tourism in Japan: Pilgrimages to "Sacred Sites" of Popular Culture*, Amherst, NY, Cambria Press.

father the most popular male character, with Yōko's husband coming in at number two. The descriptions of the characters do not read as exclamations from fans so much as the magazine editors' attempts to clarify the roles for the sake of new viewers. As it says on the first page, "Even those who have passed it by until now will get caught up once you grasp the outlines from this special section" (Ōnishi, 2013: 24–27). The magazine has a vested interest in promoting a program that is running at over 20 % ratings, and they choose to do that by sticking close to the kinds of information that NHK itself provides. Viewers receive credit for inspiring the presentation as though it were a response to their favorites, but it seems more a set-up than a dialogue. In this way, media frequently stage the appearance of exchanges with *asadora* fans.

The internet features numerous reproductions of *asadora* narratives. The national broadcaster itself maintains and propagates the most basic list: all the dramas that have been presented, when, with whom, and to what ratings, etc., online and in lavishly produced publications about the genre<sup>14</sup>. NHK's main website for the recent show *Beppin-san* (October 2016-April 2017) is a cornucopia of images and labels, the latter often enhanced by question marks, exclamation points, or both in an effort to pique the curiosity of the viewer. Tabs permit navigation to all the areas a consumer could desire, including week-by-week plot summaries, illustrated genealogies of characters, a "fun" area (*otanoshimi*), reserved for videos of press briefings and so on, frequently asked questions (which concentrate on whether one can purchase the novel or related goods, or watch a taping), a blog that highlights interviews and special appearances, and a "360 degree view" tab on which various stage sets can be experienced virtually<sup>15</sup>. NHK serves the fans, but equally endeavors to create them with varied opportunities to opt in.

Evidence that NHK is providing what fans want comes in the proliferation of reproductions. Blogs of all types give synopses, the most straightforward of reiterations, in part because NHK strictly controls the

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<sup>14</sup> The *asadora* website is <http://www9.nhk.or.jp/asadora/>. *NHK Dorama bangumibu* (2015) is a representative publication.

<sup>15</sup> I should say it was all these things. The site is gone now that a third new show beyond it has started. <http://www.nhk.or.jp/beppinsan/>, accessed 3.1.2017.

copying of *asadora*. Many call their offerings *netabare*, “spilling the beans” (from *neta*, the “featured ingredient” of sushi, or the “meat” of a story, and *bareru*, “to give away”) with focus on revealing plot developments ahead of the broadcast. In league with this exposure are *arasuji*, the “rough outline,” and *kansō*, “thoughts,” which include comments of the “can’t wait for the next episode” or “this development was interesting” sort. The synopsis, whether predictive or retrospective, seems almost indispensable for blogs and websites on the drama. It points to the pleasures of the narrative, whose miniature plot arcs unfold in six-day segments with their own subtitles, and some sort of resolution or cessation of focus reached each Saturday. The structure of weekly subplots, summarized on Saturday with a “coming next week” montage and generally reviewed on Monday through either a clip or voiceover narration at the beginning of the show, helps to channel reactions in the direction of content.

Repetition alone does not constitute dialogue or auger change. And yet it does appear to link fans to each other. One *netabare* blogger stated twice on the home page for *Hiyokko* (“Chicks”, April–October 2017) that the blog exists to make the reader happy, and warns on each week’s page that “spoilers are coming – please do not read it if you do not want to know in advance” (Junjun 2017b). *Hiyokko*, whose heroine was born in the rural portion of northern Ibaraki prefecture and goes to Tokyo to work in the spring after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, was based on an original story by an author who previously had a hit with *Churasan* (“The Promise to the Chura Sea”, April–September 2001), as NHK recycles personnel continuously. Some other preferred options for engagement were simply foreclosed by the fact that there was no opportunity to discuss the way that a novel has been adapted, or to compare the tale of the real-life model to the program. Regardless of the motivation, this *Hiyokko* blog was a pure repetition of content.

Importantly so, it turns out. To be a fan of the *asadora* is to be a repeater. Not only are the stories broadly alike, one can watch the same segment two or three times in a day. For the past several years, NHK has rerun older series as well, enabling comparisons and nostalgia for the older, better programs of one’s

youth. NHK has begun an on-demand service that provides episodes of the recent *Beppin-san* at the rate of 108 yen (a little over one U.S. dollar) per episode. Your fee, tax included, provides three days of access. Even if you do not elect to purchase, however, there is a synopsis available on click. All this repetition does not aim to reform the medium, but it may extend its reach to new types of viewers. Certainly it amounts to free labor by crowds of supporters whose noise attracts attention.

As Hanna-Riikka Roine reminds us, “fans seek out texts that give them pleasure of familiarity and that fulfil rather than challenge their expectations” (Roine, 2014: 38). Does this mean that *asadora* fans, through repetition of existing texts, train themselves to be uncritical dupes of mainstream femininity? Abigail Derecho mobilizes the term “archontic literature” to signify the ways in which fan fiction as a genre both relies upon and subverts the body of texts from which it draws. The term is a means to interrupt the usual thinking – figured in such labels as “derivative” – that places fan fiction in a relationship of subordination to the archive. In short, fans may repeat the works they appreciate and still undermine the presumed stability of the canon by their very questioning of its status as inviolable property. Nor is it necessary for rewritings to resist their canonical versions or to be remade to some standard of “originality.” (Derecho, 2006) It follows that *asadora* fans need not ask “how can I make my favorite series unrecognizable?”. It is enough to say “how can I get up again tomorrow morning and participate in a society that views women as mine does”? What small differences can the average woman effect to make her normal more bearable?

## **NEGOTIATING THE SCRIPT**

Throughout the fifty-eight years of its history thus far, with dozens of somewhat similar programs etched in the public imagination, the *asadora* has been reliable more than revolutionary. A recent kerfuffle attests to the power of viewers to create change in casting and subplots due to advances in technology. *Asa ga kita* was already doing well in the ratings thanks to the pairing of a skilled

actress with a spouse character who was sweeter on her than he needed to be (the historical spouse was known to have been disinterested in the wife to whom he was joined as a practical union of families). NHK Osaka introduced a handsome foil with an evident romantic attraction to the heroine, one Godai Tomoatsu. Godai-sama, as he was also known with a familiar honorific title, was played by the actor Dean Fujioka (giving his family name last signals his foreign connections; he was born in Japan but studied in Seattle and started his career in Hong Kong and Taiwan). Historical accuracy required the early death of Godai/Dean. In a YouTube presentation, one commentator summarized the showdown under the title “Rapid increase in the ‘Loss Phenomenon’ due to the death of Godai Tomoatsu (Dean Fujioka)”<sup>16</sup>. The author was identified by a picture of a wily comic Hyottoko mask and the label “Tokudane geinō/supoosu” (“Special tidbits on celebs and sports”).

“Special Tidbits” uses slides to report on the Twitter uproar that had erupted since NHK Osaka announced during its new year’s director’s press conference on January 7 that they planned to air the character’s death scene on January 22. “Screams are filling the net, a petition drive is spreading, and Twitter is displaying such comments as ‘Shock’, ‘Seriously?’, ‘Truth? Lies. Tears’, while some are chiding the broadcaster for leaking the news in advance”. The writer diagnoses Godai as a key to the popularity of the show, noting the response to an appearance of the tousled Godai on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January: “Godai in curls is just too sexy, I can’t cool down, this is bad!”. Framing it as a reaction to the audience, Special Tidbits notes that Sano Motohiko, the executive producer, has recognized viewers’ desires to draw Godai out past his natural death, and has promised that the weeks of January 11 and 18 will feature Godai. In fact those weeks, which were difficult for those fearful of “The Loss”, included generous highlights, and later episodes did not skimp on flashbacks.

In retrospect the script writer for the show, Ōmori Mika, noted the many letters that NHK received asking for a reprieve on Godai’s death. Others were puzzled that historical accuracy applied here but not in the case of Asa’s

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9bWvF8qQ0I>, Jan. 16, 2016, accessed 2.23.2017.

sister, who also should have died young. As Ōmori explained, she had not anticipated enthusiasts would read the historical record so carefully, nor did she foresee the volume of books that came out on the historical model Hirooka Asako, which facilitated this attention. Ōmori reports that the novel the series was based on, *Shōsetsu Tosa Horikawa*, had not contained mention of the sister in later years, which led her to imagine the sister as still living quietly somewhere (“*Asa ga kita no kyakuhonka*”, 2016). The flat-footed author paints herself as someone unaware of the power of modern media and unsuspecting of viewers’ ability to engage in an exchange with her work. She thus preserves the distinction of a behind-the-scenes space that paradoxically invites fans’ curiosity.

Some of the first reactions to any development on the *asadora* are themselves NHK products. Directly after the segment a talk show called “Asaichi” (“Morning market”) loads. The regulars at the time were a heteronormative pair, Udō Yumiko and Inohara Yoshihiko, who was the “straight and upright” younger brother to the “effervescent and powerful” Udō (A third “caster”, Yanagisawa Hideo, with a record of postings in war zones, was there to provide gravitas)<sup>17</sup>. The opening often films the three hosts and their guest standing, having just watched the sign-off of the *asadora*. Their banter mimics what is supposed to be happening in *chanoma* across the nation – a brief comment on the satisfactions or disappointments of the day’s events. On the fateful day of Godai’s passing, Udō tearfully shared her thoughts: “since the broadcast runs through March, I wanted him to live a little longer, at least through February” (*Asaichi*, January 22, 2016). By speaking as a fan— notwithstanding her position within the NHK family – Udō brought the critique of the *chanoma*, to which she herself was broadcasting, full circle. The exchange with fans was part of a virtual network of endlessly iterated performances.

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<sup>17</sup> From the program description on the *Asaichi* homepage. *Asaichi* (NHK, 2010–), <http://www1.nhk.or.jp/asaichi/about/index.html>, accessed 4.30.2017. As of March 31, 2018, Udō left NHK, and the hosts changed to a pair of male comedians and a young female newscaster.

## **SPEECH MODELS: WHO'S TALKING?**

Udō's performance attracted transmedia attention to women who shed tears over Godai. What besides such stereotypical gestures marked these fans as female? So-called traditional types of womanhood are linked to a series of assumptions in Japan about male-female difference, especially in the area of language. Women speak, or should speak, a gentler, more polite standard Japanese (although Udō herself does not particularly). Overt indexes of feminine speech include sentence endings (*wa yo, kashira*) (Nin, 2009: i-vi) and higher use of honorific and humilific registers<sup>18</sup>. Heroines in the *asadora* are generally rewarded for conforming to the stereotypes of “feminine” language, and scolded for transgressions. Many speak some variety of topolect, in line with the focus on creating credible versions of consumable locales. But they tend to learn to be positive, gentle, and caring, expressing a mind to humanity and the hierarchy of their society through language usage. What's more, viewers seem to assume that this is true feminine speech. Although tremendous cultural energy goes into promoting these features as natural and necessary, feminist scholars have shown how textbooks and education of the later nineteenth century, constructed in line with a national language policy that separated the genders, contributed to the formation of an illusory speech ideal as Japan modernized (Inoue, 2006: 80-81, and Saito, 2006). Women and girls who break linguistic protocols are presumed to be in need of pedagogical correction, not to be articulating some manner of alternate subjectivity – or if they are, that subjectivity is written off in the press and at the dinner table as wrong or dangerous or both (Miller, 2004: 231).

To the extent that the world of the morning serial is full of women's voices that perform femininity, one might expect that the writing surrounding it is also marked as feminine. In fact, much of the professional writing around the shows aspires to a maximally marketable neutrality: NHK's cottage industry of guidebooks, fanbooks, and memorial books relies heavily on illustrations, charts,

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<sup>18</sup> See Inoue, 2006: 190-91 for a translation of one of the ubiquitous surveys that NHK administers to gauge changes in people's attitudes toward “women's language”. See Endō, 2006: 86-91 for a discussion of these surveys and their findings.

synopses or teasers, and interviews. Books and mooks (*mukku*, a magazine-book hybrid) that come out on the historical background of shows with a period setting may make heavy use of exclamation points, but little else that might signal female authorship.

More differences appear with respect to generation, which is often highlighted, than to gender. Most believe that viewership rises with age, topping out among women in their seventies. The enterprise is careful to aim some of its content at long-time followers. The magazine *Tōkyōjin* (“Tokyoite”), which is not affiliated with NHK, ran an eight-page spread on the series *Amachan* with pieces by “three who are completely wrapped up in it” explaining the appeal. According to the boldface headlines, “At work, at school, at the bar after 5 – today too, *Amachan* conversations are being replayed.” The explicators are all in their late fifties. The first, essayist Hiramatsu Yōko, writes that it has been forty-seven years since she was last so caught up in an *asadora*, since the revolutionary *Ohana-han* (April 1966-April 1967). She titles her essay “Matryoshka of fiction and reality,” invoking Russian nesting dolls that to her capture the way the show layers the generations of grandmother, mother, and daughter. Columnist Yamazaki Kōichi comes next, with comments on the way the series brings together “1980s subculture symbols” with “the future of television”. He captures the popularity of the show by reproducing snatches of exchanges he has at home with his wife, whom he claims found recent programs too distant in terms of their cultural references. Now the two of them, stimulated by *Amachan*, chat happily about E.T., Nadia Comaneci, James Brown, and Van Halen. The future to which he adverts is the act of watching together via social network services or textboard communities, much as people used to watch television together on street corners. The third contributor, columnist Izumi Asato, heaps praise on the screenwriter for investing the series with perfect moments of time travel back to the 80s. He finds many of the details fascinating (Hiramatsu, Yamazaki, et Izumi, 2013: 116-23). Nostalgia, then, seems to be a significant component in these writers’ judgments of the show’s appeal. Each attempts a serious media commentary and accounting for the response to *Amachan*. The

show was often watched with enthusiasm in group settings such as community centers in the wake of the Triple Disaster, according to NHK's own reporting, and it developed a loyal following. It was no doubt a relief for NHK, which had fought back from ratings as low as 13.5 % in 2009–2010 (for *Werukame*) to 20.7 % by 2012 (with *Umechan-sensei*, “Doctor Umechan”). *Jun to Ai*, which directly preceded *Amachan*, had slipped back to 17.1 %, so *Amachan*'s 20.6 % was a reprieve.

It should not surprise us that the three authors are somewhat older. However, only one of them is a woman. Both of the male writers use the first-person pronoun *boku*, which is generally but not exclusively associated with masculine users. The female writer uses none of the normative markers of feminine speech. There is one possible indication of her female authorship, since she ends her sentences in nouns or other non-inflected parts of speech instead of verbal predicates at a ratio of 2:3, versus ratios of 1:4 and 1:5 for the two male authors<sup>19</sup>. This feature is not commonly remarked upon, however, and it is unlikely that readers would be sensitive to it as an indication of feminine writing.

Turning to online amateurs, the same by and large holds true: rather than linguistic distinctions, only hints that they drop about their social preferences suggest female authorship. NHKnoAsadorafan, housed at drama-blog.net, has relatively little beyond lists of summary, gossip, and comments in unmarked language. A brief introduction says that the authors gather morning and night to discuss the shows and blog them in the hopes that more people will enjoy the series. This might suggest that the authors are female, with a high interpersonal investment in the medium.

“Japan Blog Village” (*Nihon burogu mura*) ranks the top ten morning and daytime drama blogs in its service purview. At number ten in the middle of

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<sup>19</sup> For a chapter titled “The construction of femininity in Japanese language”, linguist Jugaku Akiko surveyed magazines aimed at male readers versus female and found that almost 50 % of the sentence endings in *Josei jishin* [Women's self] were non-standard, while for such general magazines as *Shūkan shinchō* [Weekly tide] and *Sandei mainichi* [Sunday daily], about 75 % of sentences had standard verbal endings. The survey is very old, but it indicates a strain of what publishers construe as writing for women audiences (Jugaku, 1979: 29).

February 2017 was *Asadora to uke o aishite yamanai* (“Can’t stop loving the morning drama and its reception”). The blogger, who goes by the penname Isomaru, labels herself a female in her thirties in her profile (Isomaru, 2017b). By “reception” (*uke*) she notes that she means the *Asaichi* program that airs immediately after the drama. “It is very popular because you feel like everyone is having fun watching together”, she comments (Isomaru, 2017a). Incredibly, the blogger provides a transcript with each scene change marked, after which a chatty commentary of about a paragraph precedes the reader’s comment space. This outlay of time underscores her zeal.

A blog titled “Which end is up already diary” (Mō ... nani ga nan da ka nikki) is run by Hijuni (heejun, or Moon Hee Jun), who puts “female” in her profile and pictures, while not commenting on her Korean-style name (Moon, 2017a). This particular blogger unscrolls a conversation a few comments at a time, as for example in a September 7, 2008 entry on the topic “If you don’t like it, just don’t watch? [Iya naraba minakereba ii?]”. It starts with an acknowledgment that whenever she posts criticisms, this is the response: just don’t watch it. As a defense, the blogger reminds us that she is not a fan, in fact, but only began commenting because one series, *Faito* (“Fight”, March-October 2005), was set in her hometown. “For me, the emphasis is less on ‘watching’ and more on ‘writing’, so that even if the show is boring I will continue as long as writing about various topics from it is interesting”, she demurs (Moon, 2017b). Rarely do bloggers reveal their commitment to expression for its own sake so patently. The professionals, such as Kimata Fuyu, a *furiiraitaa* (free writer) who specializes in theater and film reportage as well as novelizations and contributes frequent *asadora* summaries with some commentary, are more polished in their prose, but no more direct in communicating to their readers (Kimata, 2016).

Of 145 members of the Blog Village, a surprising number identify themselves as male, such as Arayama Hajime, the “old dude (*oyaji*) who talks morning drama”. His self-introduction mentions fifteen years in the advertising business; as a writer and blogger he covers drama, celebrity, sports, and whatnot, promising to devote himself to the entertainment world (Arayama,

2014). Another segment is his blog “Men’s child-rearing and housework”, in which he shares the fact that he struggles with his fourteen-year-old daughter’s homework every night. Framed in pink type, a recent entry (February 23, 2017) tells the tale of a new frozen product, a “rice ball helper”, that is to say, instant ingredients and flavoring (Arayama, 2017). He crosses the line between amateur and pro, and activates signs of his participation in women’s concerns.

A common credential that full-time commentators on the *asadora* invoke is the name of the first series she or he watched *in toto*. This enables fans to establish a shared past. In the case of “junjun,” the owner of *Asadora okkake fan site!!* [“Morning drama chasers fan site!!”], the show was *Churasan*, but the first program in the chronicle is *Asa ga kita*. In the splash page and bio, the author writes in a stridently marked form of Kansai-ben, the dialect of western Japan. Sentences end in *ya nen na* or *ten ya nen* or *yan ne*, all highly informal, while the majority of titles have an exclamation point, preferably two, or a question mark to drive the label home (Junjun, 2017a). The site has a great deal of white space and is mostly unelaborated, except for the portrait of the author, drawn by his five-year-old son (Junjun, 2017c). Yes, this author too is male. Exclamation points and casual language gesture at a desire to be approachable, perhaps.

One of many blogs to offer synopses, *Asadora joyū burogu* [“Asadora actresses blog”], has the URL [motokariya.seesaa.net](http://motokariya.seesaa.net). Seesaa is the Japan Blog Village address; Motokariya turns out to be the family name of an actress who played in the series *Faito*. The entries are short and do not display gender markers, nor does the identity of the poster, who signs as Dorama Annaijin (“Drama Guide”). The only indication that the blog may be by a man is the occasional presence of a photo of one of the drama stars in some state of undress (Dorama, 2017). Thus while it is largely impossible to find linguistic markers of gender among writers on *asadora*, readers cannot miss the fact that a number of the bloggers are – or present themselves as – men. I find little indication that men constrain their posting behavior among this majority female audience in the way that Sarah Pedersen saw men on the UK parenting website Mumsnet behave (Pedersen, 2015). At best Japanese men are eager to explain

their motives. But it is premature to say whether this is because of a difference in gendered interactions in Japan, or because television sharing is less fraught than sharing advice on childcare.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the *asadora* “cheerleaders”, who recapitulate the stories as though they were synchronized routines (which at the level of plot arc they are), come the “quibblers”, who must point out what is wrong with the current offering. Their arrows are easily found by a search for the keyword *iraira*, meaning “annoying” or “irritating”. The onomatopoeia *iraira* indexes a physical inability to sit still through even a quarter hour. Frustration knows no gender bounds, but it may be made more potent by the identification that some viewers feel with the heroine. Just as often, however, it seems to arise from a worry about weak ratings, another way in which fans align themselves with NHK. *Rekidora.com* answers the question “Why are we irritated with Beppin-san? [Beppin-san ni iraira suru no wa naze?]” in a post that spreads out with bold face, red ink, and enlarged font for keywords. The author diagnoses the problem as coming from the fact that the show is produced in Osaka, which is known for taking risks with the form, and promises that, much as *Massan* (September 2014-March 2015) eventually delivered the story of a happy marriage after being bashed for putting the husband out of work, *Beppin-san* will overcome complaints about the surly attitudes of several of its characters and round out with happiness in the end. Thus the *asadora* will fulfill its *raison d’être*, and shows will continue to arrive in homes. That is a goal for critics speaking whatever language. In truth the conclusion that *asadora* is only for women has never held – a 52.6 % viewership would not materialize if no men were watching – and NHK’s analyses and outreach to men may be contributing to more male fans than ever.

## **MORNING COMFORT**

Implicit in the traditional arc of the *asadora* is a dual ask by state and society: a woman will become a wife, who whether working outside or full time in the house will shoulder the burden for the everyday happiness of the broader

population. It has been a conservative, multigenerational vision of family that the *asadora* tends to proffer. So long as she attends to their needs, a woman is free to pursue her professional dreams. Does this mean that female fans are finding more inspiration to dedicate themselves to work from the morning drama's capable, competitive women? I would argue no, and for two reasons. One, the shows do not empower watchers with accounts of actual societal conditions, such as those that enabled the historical model for Asa, Hirooka Asako (1849–1919), to found a bank, the first life insurance company, and the first women's university in Japan. The series did not portray her Christian faith or her husband's neglect of her, which, along with the considerable wealth she was born and married into, freed her to devote herself to projects<sup>20</sup>. Second, fans were charmed by Asa's adventures opening a coal mine in the nineteenth century, but at the end of the day it was the death of the dashing Godai that prompted action – and inaction. The show actually seems to have deflated women's urge to work hard. A representative Tweet read “My daily pleasure has disappeared ... my make-up ran and I wanted to take time off” (Sugiyama, 2016: 2). *Sankei West*, a branch of one of the biggest business news outlets, reported within an hour of the death scene broadcast with such quotes as “Starting tomorrow I don't know how I will wake up” (Sugiyama, 2016: 1). If anything, fans avoided the conclusion that Asa's struggles would gird them for theirs.

One of the themes that emerges strongly from any reading of the products that surround this genre now is the desire for neatly, and above all romantically, tied-up ends (It should be said that these are arguably more the exception than the rule in evening television or in Japanese literary standards). Alongside all the repetitious blogs and handbooks, the most imaginative responses lie in fanfiction. It would appear that *asadora* does not produce much in the way of this creative form, except in the case of reactions to *Asa ga kita*. Pixiv.net hosts thirty-five short fictions on this program. Fans were delighted

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<sup>20</sup> Several publications and a heavily visited exhibition informed the public of these facts. See, for example, *Hirooka Asako no shōgai* [“The life of Hirooka Asako”], *Bessatsu Takarajima*, No. 2387, October 2015.

and bewildered by the final scene of the final episode, in which Asa, visibly aged, tosses aside her cane and runs through a field of yellow spring flowers to meet her mate, who had died the day before – forty-nine days having passed between the two episodes, the time at which Buddhism teaches the spirit moves on to its next incarnation (*Asa ga kita*, NHK, April 2, 2016). Was this her death scene, or a dream? A fanfiction entitled *Asa to Shinjirō* [Asa and Shinjirō], short at 4,000 characters, casts the run in the flower fields as a vision that Asa has on the seventh anniversary of her husband’s death. The fanfic author puts this revelation in about the middle of the narrative, and has Asa reveal to her older sister that she often sees Shinjirō, since he comes with the rain that during his lifetime always accompanied his happy occasions. With its focus on the meaning of life after death (Shinjirō is patiently waiting on the other side for his bride to finish her work in the world) and motifs of seasonal flowers, the fiction prompts slow tears<sup>21</sup>.

What, if anything, does this fanfiction tell us? Are fans trying to move the genre, and possibly thereby society’s view of them? On one level it appears so: viewers of late seem to seek a more strictly handsome, private, even if unreliable, partner. The same was true of *Carnation*. But they seem equally to cheer on heroines who will not go out on a limb for romance. Fans of *Toto-nee-chan* (Fatherly Sister, April-October 2016) did not blink (much) when the title character let her childhood sweetheart move away and rededicated herself to editing the lifestyle magazine into which she had poured so many of her postwar hours. This was the choice made by the historical model for the series, and in any case Toto-nee-chan had a full-time male colleague in Hanayama Isaji, who although he was married, spent much of his time with her at the office producing the magazine. His role as substitute or spiritual spouse was so prominent that *asadora* fans seem barely to have noticed the alternative possibilities of this character, who was based on a real-life cross-dressing artist/editor. NHK presents his motivations in terms of commercialism – he

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<sup>21</sup> The work is by a collaborator that signs itself 仁希くらら. The first name may be read Masaki or Niki, and refers to the writer, while Kurara is the name of the illustrator. They list 194 collaborations on Pixiv.

wears a skirt once in order to better understand the women for whom he is editing the magazine. He generally sports blousons with trim, eliciting few diegetical comments and no measurable reaction from the audience. Whereas the period-costumed leads of *Asa ga kita* provoked countless drawings by amateurs and pros alike, Hanayama's image in women's or even womanish clothing was hardly seen on the internet. Nor have I found any calls to move him closer to the historical Hanamori Yasuji, who wore a rolled bob and sometimes make-up<sup>22</sup>. Fans seemed to be content with a strictly hetero-normative representation of this challenging model.

Here is an opportunity wasted. Why do there seem to be so few alternative fans creating new, norm-busting modes of being women in the world through the online tools that are available to them? Shouldn't Japanese viewers be fighting back against the imaginaries that oppress them? Or do we need to step back from the presumption that this would be a virtue? As Deborah Shamoon argues, feminist fixation on rebellion and the search for girls (or women) who reject patriarchal norms should not lead us to neglect the cultures – supportive, protective, pleasurable – that females have actually enjoyed (Shamoon, 2012: 137–38). Fan studies warn us against maintaining that “fandom is embedded within the culture of resistance” (Chin, 2013: 90). While the responses to *asadora* do not write new scripts of empowerment, neither do they pledge complete self-sacrifice. At the top of the list of characterizations viewers give to *asadora* as a genre, we find “wholesome”, “bright”, “fresh”, “comforting”, “forward-looking”, “successful”, “safe”, “vivacious”, “calm”, and “thought-provoking” (Nihei, 2016: 13). Even Takō, who thinks of *asadora* as giving life lessons, describes these fifteen minutes as “comfort and warm feelings at the beginning of the Japanese day” (Takō, 2012: 295). Audiences particularly value a “safe” portrayal, with the nuance that they will not be subjected to outlandish stories or negative turns, such as bullying (Nihei, 2016: 13–14).

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<sup>22</sup> Many accounts maintain that Hanamori was not a cross-dresser, in spite of anecdotal and photographic evidence, as for example a pocket biography printed during the show's run (Aoyama, 2016: 153-54).

Waking up to the morning serial has become more than a ritual for Japanese, and more than a woman's distraction. One Asazō (his penname is a combination of "morning" and part of a name of a character in *Gochisō-san* (Sept. 2013–March 2014), which centered on food) recounts the deep history of his family's engagement with *asadora*, which takes him back to his mother singing in his early childhood. His core memory is of how his grandfather used to take over the *chanoma* when the show was on, and how as a child he snuck in and saw the patriarch with huge tears running down his face as watched TV. Men have also found a voice in the discourse surrounding the serial, and if it ultimately reinforces the ideal of family, it is with a similar focus on comfort and relief from the pressures of properly gendered behavior, or its opposite.

What we find when exploring a variety of responses, then, is not necessarily a world of change led by women, nor a passive acceptance of the roles assigned to them. In writing back to the screen, authors set aside gendered linguistic devices and other campaigns. Their shows are not fields for battle or work. Instead it appears that *asadora* exist as a space of relief and release from both innovative and conservative visions of women's lives. Producers and viewers alike invest in scenes of dialogue and co-participation, often faked but evidently no less comforting for that. Preservation of the medium is a virtue to both sides, resulting in selective viewing that overlooks if it does not reject transgressive moments in storylines. Fans write to each other, consoling themselves when members of their television family pass on. Women, and even men, seem to capture the programs for their own uses, which are not aligned with the old gendered logics of the economic superpower that is (still) Japan.

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