

## Victorian Maids and Neo-Victorian Labour in Kaoru Mori's *Emma: A Victorian Romance*

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**Abstract:** While neo-Victorian graphic narratives have proliferated in the West (especially in Britain and the U.S.), Japan has emerged as an equally robust site of neo-Victorian production. This paper examines the persistence of the British nineteenth century in Japanese manga and explores the question: what role does the Victorian past play in the Japanese present? I focus on Kaoru Mori's popular manga series: *Emma: A Victorian Romance* (2002-2006). Set in the 1880s and drawing on a variety of Victorian tropes and narratives, Mori chronicles the story of Emma, a young maid from London, who enters into an upstairs/downstairs romance with William Jones, the eldest son of an industrialist family. In this article, I explore the curious conflation of the work of the female manga artist (as depicted by Mori's autobiographical cartoons included with each volume of the series) with that of the Victorian maid. I argue that the reappearance of the Victorian maid in *Emma* and the 'maid café' phenomenon forms a serious engagement with Japan's (post)feminist politics perceived to be haunted by gender ideologies from its Meiji-era past.

**Keywords:** domestic, *Emma: A Victorian Romance*, Japan, labour, maid, manga, Kaoru Mori, upstairs/downstairs romance.

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Japan remains a rarity in neo-Victorian fiction. One of the few exceptions is William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's 1990 steampunk classic, *The Difference Engine*.<sup>1</sup> In this novel, the Japanese ambassador, Mori Arinori, a fictionalised version of the statesman who was educated in Britain and the U.S. and who brought Western philosophy back to Japan in the 1840s, begins a cultural apprenticeship with Laurence Oliphant, a British politician and rumoured spy. Victorian Britain, however, features prominently in Japanese cultural production, especially in its popular visual culture. The much-documented Gothic Lolita phenomenon, for example, is a sartorial adaptation of elements of Victorian fashion. In anime, the most well-known example in neo-Victorian studies is probably Otomo Katsuhiro's *Steamboy* (2005), but one might also include the pan-European nineteenth-century setting of the slipstream fantasy *Last Exile* (2003). In manga, the beloved

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*Lady Victorian* (1998) series by Naoko Moto offers yet another example of neo-Victorianism in Japanese culture which predates Sarah Waters's gender play, and features a governess's relationship with the cross-dressing Lady Ethel who is really the cult novelist Argent Gray. Yet another example, the supernatural *Earl Cain* (2006-2007) saga, which focuses on Cain Hargreaves, a child of incest, and his involvement with a secret organisation known as Delilah, depicts a darker version of the nineteenth century. Along with stories set in a Victorian-like or Gothic Lolita universe, *Alice 19<sup>th</sup>* (2007) and *Pandora Hearts* (2006-present) engage with the *Alice in Wonderland* aesthetic and thereby provide access to a tangential neo-Victorian setting. Similarly, *The Earl and The Fairy* (2008-present), an on-going series, presents readers with a magical Victorian world of the contemporary author's own making. Depending on where one stands on the geographical, historical, or ideological boundaries of the 'Victorian' in neo-Victorian studies, one may also include examples that engage with Japan's own nineteenth-century or Meiji-era past: *Samurai Champloo* (2004-2005), an anachronistic hip-hop samurai anime series, pitches its Japanese characters against Admiral Perry's sailors in a softball game, and the extremely popular *Rurouni Kenshin* (1996-1998) manga (that has since gone multi-media), a samurai/assassin nationalist saga, is set in 1878.

For this article, however, I would like to focus primarily on Kaoru Mori's manga series *Emma: A Victorian Romance* (2002-2006), which was adapted into an equally successful anime, because *Emma's* Victorian setting and Japanese context raise powerful questions about access to a global memory of 'the Victorian' and what Mori's version or framing of the Victorian reveals about the Japan in which it is embedded. Contemporaneous with the phenomenon of maid 'cosplay' (a contraction of costume and play) and the establishment of maid cafés in Japan, *Emma* carefully reconstructs, romanticises and fetishises the domestic labour of women in Victorian England. The series inspired its own *Emma*-themed maid café, *Victorian Café Emily*, which opened and closed within a few years in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.<sup>2</sup> Despite the depiction of sisterhood and women supporting other women both upstairs and downstairs, the manga never fully contests the established expectations for contemporary Japanese women to be 'good wives and wise mothers', an ideology inherited from Japan's nineteenth-century past. *Emma* thus presents a significant challenge to twenty-first century readers seeking to fulfil one of

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(Western) neo-Victorianism's agendas, namely, the "preoccupation with liberating lost voices and repressed minorities left out of the public record" and how their recuperation might aid in "imagining more viable ways of living with one another in the future" (Kohlke 2008: 9).

### 1. Made in Japan: An Overview of *Emma*

Published in Japan between 2002 and 2006, Mori's seven-volume neo-Victorian manga series, *Emma: A Victorian Romance*, is partly *shōjo* and *josei* manga, formulaically geared towards a primarily female reading audience.<sup>3</sup> In *Emma*, Mori draws on a variety of Victorian literary tropes and narratives, as well as some outrageous melodrama, to tell the story of Emma, a bespectacled Victorian maid. Set in the 1880s between the great houses of London and Haworth, the manga charts a simple upstairs/downstairs romance that goes some way in explaining *Emma's* seemingly universal popularity.

The popularity of the series unfortunately occludes child labour, a host of issues surrounding paid and unpaid domestic labour, and the social-sexual contracts that belie the bourgeois family construct. Despite her deep misgivings about the disparity between their stations, Emma nonetheless falls in love with William Jones, the eldest son of an industrialist family seeking to find legitimacy in the ranks of England's aristocracy. The pair meets at the house of Mrs Stowner, William's former governess and Emma's employer. Mrs Stowner herself married well, able to quit her employment as a governess and command her own household as a wife and widow. Orphaned at a young age, Emma is kidnapped from the countryside and almost sold to a London brothel; escaping her captors, the young Emma's intelligence and willingness to work is immediately recognised by Mrs Stowner who raises and educates her. Mrs Stowner's support of Emma's relationship with William demonstrates her commitment to the next generation of working class women who better themselves by marrying further up the social ladder.<sup>4</sup>

Telling Emma's childhood in flashbacks using predominantly 'silent' panels without dialogue or narrative, Mori draws visually on art by Gustave Doré, illustrations from Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), and iconic archival photographs of East End slums in order to depict Emma's Dickensian origins. These visual cues provide readers, both in Japan and the West, with what Roland Barthes refers to as

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the “adherence” of the image to our horizon of expectations of the Victorian (Barthes 1981: 6).

In the context of women’s labor that I trace, however, silent panels take on new significance. Silence, in fact, speaks volumes about the often-invisible nature of women’s work and accentuates Mori’s decision to speak, textually and visually, on behalf of the maids in the series. Indeed, the manga’s silences divulge a multiplicity of voices: the many addendums to *Emma – Emma: Further Tales* (2007-2008), *Emma Historical Guide* (2003) and the “Afterword Mangas” included at the end of each volume of the manga – become a forum for discussion between Mori, Emma and their readers.

Both Emma and William are considered ‘upstarts’ in Victorian society, flaunting class rules and societal norms in their pursuit of romance. The couple is foiled along the way by various patriarchal figures: William’s father, who married into the gentry, opposes the relationship with assistance from the Viscount Campbell. To punish William for jilting his daughter Eleanor, the Viscount pays to have Emma kidnapped, by a character recognisably based on Mayhew’s illustration of “The Jew old-clothes man”, and have her forcibly ‘emigrated’ to America.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the series, Emma and William’s biggest advocate remains William’s friend, the Indian Prince Hakim whose own love for Emma remains unrequited. Hakim’s fortune finances Emma’s rescue and the reunion of the two lovers at the end of the series. With harem and elephants in tow, Mori confronts readers with a highly orientalist stereotype in Hakim, but offers little to no critique of colonialism or any demonstration of postcolonial awareness. Despite his easy-going nature and generosity, Hakim’s obvious domination over his harem does not necessarily invite readers to reflect on Britain’s or Japan’s own imperial past.

Aristocratic and powerful women, whose limited influence lies within the domestic sphere, aid the pair as they attempt to sustain their relationship. Forced to leave London after Mrs Stowner’s death, Emma’s creative hard work captures the attention of her new German employer, Mrs Dorothea Mölder, who takes Emma on as her personal maid and introduces her as an appropriate companion to William’s mother, Aurelia. Using the pseudonym “Mrs Trollope”, Aurelia’s New Woman ideals and poor health have separated her from William’s father and ostracised her from society.

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However, Aurelia earns her return to her family by reconciling her husband to the couple's inevitable marriage. Like Mrs Stowner, both women recognise Emma's problematically 'innate' aristocratic sensibilities, as well as her seemingly sincere relationship to work, and together they plot to help the couple overcome class prejudices.

However benign the motivations of these 'real' Victorian housewives of the manga, their mobility as private and public figures is facilitated by what Bridget Anderson describes as a "cast of women in supportive roles as domestic workers" like Emma who perform the "alternative arrangements covering the loss of their reproductive labor" (Anderson 2000: 5). Anderson's discussion focuses on the mobility and opportunity afforded by paid domestic help to contemporary working women participating in "masculinised employment patterns" (Anderson 2000: 5). While Dorothea and Aurelia do not seek to work, their forays into the public sphere come at the expense of chaining other women to the domestic sphere as their substitutes.

Overall, the series seems reluctant to enlarge the reader's experience of the "cast of women" who labour throughout the pages of the series. The online version of the chapter entitled 'The Maids of Mölders House', for example, depicts the disruption of a day in the life of the Mölder maids as Emma and William seek shelter and counsel from the Mölders after Emma's rescue from America. Throughout the chapter, the servants' dialogue tends towards the cheerful and optimistic banter of the 'happy worker': maids look forward without complaint to their next day off, anticipate the price of ribbons, and proffer advice to younger servants on how to accept and manage their work.

On one 'silent' page, Mori favours cropped close-ups of cleaning tools, often placed next to close-ups of maids' faces, intent and focused on their work.<sup>6</sup> The interspersing of regularly spaced panels (three to a row) with panels that might span an entire row or column draw attention equally to the monotony of time and the frenetic energy of the maids' activities. The images of the cleaning tools are incomplete, suggesting that there is no end to the amount of work these women perform; at the same time, as readers, we too 'work' to complete the images or "commit closure" in our heads (McCloud 1993: 64). However, the only closure or cessation of work available to the Mölder maids, the series suggests, lie in their good fortune to find rich husbands like Emma or, at least, middle-class husbands like Mrs

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Stowner. The greatest strength (and perhaps weakness, in this case) of the graphic novel form can be found in readers' participation in what Scott McCloud has defined as the construction of a "continuous, unified reality" through closure across the gutter (McCloud 1993: 67). Yet it is hard to say whether my investment in *Emma's* silences is anything more than my own desire for closure resulting in a critique of the paid domestic labour of young women.

Reading neo-Victorian manga in translation and often in the West can be misleading as Japanese manga and anime (and occasionally, neo-Victorianism) feature a curious visual and racial homogeneity that can dupe the reader into simplistic over-identifications: these characters, so Westernised in appearance, must be like 'us'. Or more specifically, the depiction of Emma as white, English and Victorian must represent the "normative feminist subject of white, Western feminism" (McCann and Kim 2003: 6). While *Emma* may not ultimately trouble the Japanese status quo, it does function as a cautionary tale, reminding readers and neo-Victorian scholars alike to take into consideration the multiplicity of women's experiences and the ways women are re-subordinated as women in global non-Western examples of neo-Victoriana.

## **2. The Manga Artist and the Victorian Maid**

If, as McCloud has argued, Japanese manga tends to generate visual emphasis by thickening the lines of realism (McCloud 1993: 44), then not only is Mori visually imitating the Victorian realist novel, she also emphasises that in *this* Victorian world, every detail of the Victorian home is worthy of our attention – and thus, also falls under a maid's cleaning duty *and* the manga artist's pen. Mori's reconstruction of the Victorian background and settings are equally accurate and exhaustive copies of nineteenth-century photographs. Her tracings sometimes appear in the series as separate, silent, partially framed or unframed panels emphasising the ways in which the past bleeds into the present. Using carefully labelled pages such as "Cheapside, London 1896" and "Westminster Bridge 1896" (Mori 2006 (6): [182 and 183]), Mori directs the reader to easily find the corresponding archival photograph.<sup>7</sup>

Eddie Campbell employs a similar strategy in his illustrations for Alan Moore's neo-Victorian opus *From Hell* (1989-96), an immense fictionalisation of the Whitechapel murders of 1888. For Moore, Campbell

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and other Western graphic novelists like Bryan Talbot, who recreate the Victorian, the nineteenth-century photographs they reference function as collective memories and our recognition of them allows us to participate in a community of cultural knowledge that is particularly British. To read the photographs in *From Hell*, for example, requires an act of decoding that draws upon an archive of general knowledge about the Victorian that Mori and her primarily Japanese readers may not have access to. In fact, after the series ended, Mori illustrated an annotated guide to the historical references in *Emma*. Mori has a self-expressed “mania for all things English” (Mori 2006 (1): [185]) but, unable to travel for historical research until Volume 5 of the series, Mori hired a fact-checker to help her with historical accuracy. Copying nineteenth-century photographs provides Mori with a method of appropriation to possess the Britain to which she had no access at the time of writing. In addition to arguments about British heritage’s international scope, Mori’s labour-intensive reconstruction of the Victorian reveals a self-referential anxiety about gendered labour and work that can be compared to Emma’s domestic labour and the labour of all the various maids in the series.

Mori comments on her own labour in the various ‘Afterword Mangas’ that she includes at the end of each volume of the series, entitled ‘Gentleman’s Fancy: Maids in Black’, ‘Do You Like Corsets’, ‘Is It Fun Playing Whist By Oneself?’ and other self-professed “silly” or “ridiculous” themes (Mori 2006 (2): 193). It is not unusual in Japanese manga for the writer/illustrator to include paratextual autobiographical stories or asides about the writing process or to give thanks to or answer questions from fans and readers. At the end of each volume, Mori might describe her research (“I hunted for as many England-related books as possible, to the point where I lost control of myself” [Mori 2006 (2): 194]), offer tips on how to make a lavender sachet (Mori 2006 (3): 186) and document the progression of her “maid-mania” and her reputation with her editors as “the ‘lonesome hunter’ who can only draw maids” (Mori 2006 (4): 185).

Mori, who is notoriously shy and rarely gives interviews, is particularly self-deprecating in cartoons of herself as a crazed writer with wild hair: Mori’s time seems clearly more invested in her characters and their Victorian world, not in her own self-portrait. These ‘Afterword Mangas’ contain multiple images of Mori banging her head on drafting tables after arguing with her editor about details that absolutely need to be

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kept in the manga despite the time and effort of recreation. The phrase Mori most often repeats is “that’s important!” (Mori 2006 (1): [186]), referring to the difficult decisions underlying her editing process.<sup>8</sup> Mori depicts the female manga artist as someone harassed by fans and editors, “bummed out (because of deadlines, etc.)”, overworked and impoverished (Mori 2006 (6): 177) – in other words, very much like the Victorian maids that she draws. Also of interest is Mori’s self-reported masochism regarding her drawing process. In ‘Maids in Black’, for example, Mori describes her boundless enthusiasm for a ballroom scene, forgetting that she is the one who has to draw all the faces. A panel of Mori slumped over her drafting board like a piece of paper drawing “face...face...face...face...face...” is followed by another panel showing just the tip of Mori’s head visible and a question: “masochist?” (Mori 2006 (1): [186]). If we are to take Mori’s question literally, what does it mean to submit to the Victorian?

While Mori’s masochism does not appear to be sexual and *Emma* is by no means maid *hentai* (sexually explicit or pornographic) manga, her commentary reveals an anxiety about when her subject – domestic service – transforms into her own servitude and, what agency, if any, the writer and her characters can exercise in their relationship to the Victorian. Or, to put it another way, when does the “structure of relation” (Bal 1999: xi) to the Victorian past turn from pleasure into pain? If, as John Kenneth Noyes has argued, the imagery of masochism and the masochist’s body were “invented” as a way to “resolve some of the crises in liberal concepts of agency” that emerged during the late-nineteenth century (Noyes 1997: 8), then it can be argued that Mori’s masochism underpins a dual narrative. The first views Emma’s body as the literal embodiment of the return of the repressed socio-political contradictions and aggression that get shunted away when the (female) liberal subject is “imagined as self-determining, free, aggressive and self-controlled” (Noyes 1997: 6), and the second depicts Mori’s body as the site of difficult negotiations of an exploitative, aggressive and male-dominated manga industry.

To understand how the bodies of the manga artist and the Victorian maid are marked by disciplinary processes that, in turn, produce what Jennifer Prough has called “affective labour” (Prough 2011: 5), I turn to the manga industry. Reminiscent of Victorian publication dynamics, manga titles are first serialised in magazines and then, if lucrative, gathered into paperbacks and books, which is how manga is usually received in the West.

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The series may then be animated, as in the case of *Emma*, and may have spin-offs in other media formats such as novelisation, live-action films, drama CDs, video games and other forms of character licensing (Schodt 1996: 21). Typically marketed to teenage girls, *shōjo* manga has a long history linked to the expression and experience of Japanese girlhood, an essentially conservative feminine identity that emerged during Japan's nineteenth-century educational reforms and required constant monitoring (Takahashi 2008: 116). Functioning within a patriarchal discourse and system that privileged boys over girls, *shōjo* nonetheless developed its own visual idioms and girlish agendas that illustrated girls' bodies as "elegant, nonlabouring, nonproductive bodies" (Takahashi 2008: 116).

While the features of *shōjo* "typically focused on the inner feelings of their young girl heroines, who personified desirable feminine virtues and expressed those feelings in a flowery, emotional prose style" (Takahashi 2008: 115), only girls and readers familiar with the visual codes and language of *shōjo* – for example, the gigantic sparkling eyes so common in female characters, which are considered windows of expression – could identify with and immerse themselves in the richness of a *shōjo* heroine's interior life.<sup>9</sup> *Emma* adds to the genre by reframing the stereotypically large *shōjo* eyes with Emma's spectacles and, by extension, rereading the girl's body as one that can be read for emotional content *and* one that is capable of being valued differently for performing work and labour.

According to Prough's study of the *shōjo* manga industry, the 1970s saw a massive gender shift in the manga workforce: while 75% of *shōjo* manga magazine editors remained mainly men, 99% of artists were now women (Prough 2011: 96). While there are some successful women editors in the mass media industry, Prough accounts for these disparate numbers by drawing attention to the highly gendered corporate system of Japanese publishing that allowed employers to hire on two tracks: the "integrated/managerial" track and the "clerical" track (Prough 2011: 91). Despite being based in gender equality legislation thanks to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1986, the two tracks nonetheless became divided along gendered lines. The managerial track called for long, unpredictable working hours and further promotion often depended on relocation, thus attracting male employees over female ones who preferred more stable hours and geographical permanence at the expense of vertical upward movement through the company (Prough 2011: 92). The clerical

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track, Prough adds, discouraged women from pursuing promotion and encouraged them to quit after marriage or childbirth.

The division of labour in the manga industry is also highly gendered: while artists, even established ones, are signed on short-term contracts, editors work full time on the post-war ‘salary man system’ that guarantees a living wage and a pension. Artists share ownership of their creative production with the publishing company and are often paid by the page, therefore ensuring that no profit is necessarily made until the series gains popularity and is compiled into a book. Extra profit for the artist and the publishing house could be generated by requested illustrations for magazines, book covers and other forms of commercial use. Most artists, Prough adds, work out of their homes (Prough 2011: 92). Unlike their Western counterparts, manga editors involve themselves in every stage of the writing process, helping artists pace their stories and developing content and style based on their knowledge of readership and the market. Male editors are distinguished, surprisingly, for their lack of knowledge about the *shōjo* genre, thus allowing them to maintain their business acumen and focus on the bottom line in their partnership with young female artists too devoted, so the narrative goes, to their creativity. *Shōjo* manga artists, on the other hand, tend to be young women valued, of course, for their creativity and artistic talent but also because as *shōjo* readers themselves, they supposedly possess an “affinity” with readers and provide insider knowledge of “what girls want” (Prough 2011: 9, 6). “The answer,” Prough astutely notes, “seems to be as simple and as serious as gender ideology” (Prough 2011: 97).

Reading Mori’s ‘Afterword Mangas’ only confirms Prough’s analysis: in ‘Maids in Black’, Mori depicts her editor as a faceless male who pedantically drills her with questions about the story’s pace, commenting on how “Emma’s skirt spreads out just a little too widely...” or asking whether in “this part, the shop girl gets too excited” (2006 (1): [186]). In ‘Together in A Rotten Row’, the Chief Editor of *Comic Beam*, who calls Mori a “weird woman” appears as “XXXMura” and, to me, appears amphibious, even *hentai* (2006, (3): 185)! In connecting the exploitation of female manga artists with that of the Victorian maid, I find it very suggestive that Prough uses the phrase, “an artist just starting out and publishing a short manga every few months cannot make enough to live on” (Prough 2011: 92).

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### 3. Japan's Victorian Past: 'Good Wives, Wise Mothers'

An ideology about femininity and the workplace that derives from cross-cultural contact between Japan and Britain in the nineteenth century drives this gendered system of the manga publishing world and, I am going to argue, also drives the reappearance of the Victorian maid in post-millennial Japan. After centuries of seclusion, feudal Japan was unable to sustain its closed-door policy if it was to develop into an economic and political entity on the world stage. Forced into contact with Western powers by the so-called 'unequal treaties' imposed on Japan by the arrival of Admiral Perry, Lord Elgin and other technologically advanced foreign consuls, the Restoration of the Emperor in 1868 was an attempt to exert control over Japan's international transformation. Under the leadership of the powerful political Satsuma and Choshu clans, seven centuries of feudalism were cast off and power 'restored' to an emperor who would lead Japan, via modernisation and Westernisation, to meiji or 'enlightenment' (Hane and Perez 2012: 84-89). Viewing Britain as *the* dominant Western power, Japan sent young men like Mori Arinori, the Japanese ambassador to Britain fictionalised in *The Difference Engine*, on diplomatic, cultural and fact-finding "missions" to Britain "to convince the West of Japan's change and modernity and to master the techniques of power and wealth" (Jansen 2002: 287). Western philosophy, technology and culture, for example, were adopted to craft a new nationalism and capitalism distinctive to Japan. Unwilling to be seen as a weak or second-class nation like Japan's great rival China, whose own 'unequal treaties' had led to concessions and the ceding of territory, Japan buttressed its imperialist project and national distinctiveness with Western ideals (Hane and Perez 2012: 195).

In her analysis of *Emma*, Inger Sigrun Brody argues for the manga's acknowledgement of the availability of "new social opportunities" alongside "nostalgia for lost traditions and social forms" (Brody 2011: 24, 25). She makes the connection, albeit briefly, between the massive social and technological shifts brought about by Britain's Industrial Revolution and the incorporation of Western technology and science into the fabric of Meiji Japan's national identity and life since the nineteenth century (Brody 2011: 25-26). However, Brody's observation that *Emma's* Victorian setting "stems from nostalgia for an early Meiji world" (Brody 2011: 25) deserves much more attention when considered within the context of women and work that I am tracing.

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Educational reformers such as Mori Arinori believed that a nation's civilisation could be measured by the status of its women and thus poured energy into education for young girls. "Woman", according to Rebecca Copeland, "signified Japan itself: a weak nation amidst superior Western powers" (Copeland 2000:11), and the 'Woman Question' became the rallying point for reformers' efforts to civilise the nation. Mori's hugely influential writing generated many of the contradictions vis-à-vis women's roles; for example, he advocated that:

regarding the chief aim of female education, it is that the person will become a good wife (*ryosai*) and a wise mother (*kenbo*); it is to nurture a disposition and train talents adequate [for the] task of rearing children and of managing a household [...]. The basis of national wealth is education and the foundation (*konpon*) of education is female education. The encouragement or discouragement of female education, we must remember, has a bearing on national tranquillity or its absence. (Mori, qtd. in Mackie 2003: 25)

But he would also uphold Confucian values of righteousness and morality that limited the educational curriculum for girls and women's rights in society in the interests of the nation-state. Thanks to writers like Mori, the established paradigm for the higher education of girls in Japan became the cultivating of 'good wives and wise mothers'. Susan D. Holloway argues, that this national ideology has haunted modern Japanese feminism and identity politics despite the emergence of an early feminist movement that also had its roots in the enlightenment of the Meiji era (Holloway 2010: 10).

One can see, moreover, that the heavily gendered nationalist ideology of Meiji Japan resonates uncannily with the domestic imperialism of Victorian England. Mori's writing can be compared to Mrs Stickney Ellis's agenda to strengthen the "connexion which exists between the women of England, and the moral character maintained by their country in the scale of nations", by "warning the women of England back to their domestic duties, in order that they may become better wives, more useful daughters, and mothers, who by their example shall bequeath a rich inheritance to those who follow in their steps" (Ellis 1839: 38, 39). Furthermore, the myth of the Meiji Empress, who, like Queen Victoria, was

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regarded as the perfect model for educated womanhood, makes alignments between Victorian England and Meiji Japan particularly fluid. Like Emma, Meiji women found themselves in an impossible position on the cusp of transcending the limitations of old regimes and social institutions but unable to escape them.

Reading *Emma* and its larger maid culture context reveals a similar set of difficulties facing Japanese women in the present.<sup>10</sup> Can Japanese women transcend the limitations of old regimes, especially those surrounding paid labour, emblematised by both the Victorian maid and the manga artist, that renders them potentially invisible as workers? One peculiarity of the Japanese work force, despite many exceptions to the rule, is the huge drop in women working after their middle years. Mapping female participation in the workforce against age creates the so-called ‘M-curve’: the rate of women entering the workplace “declines during women’s marriage and childbearing years of twenty-five to thirty-four and then rises again starting from age thirty-five” (Toshiaki 2010: 13). According to studies of Japan’s labour history, after giving birth, many Japanese women simply do not return to work; paid work would be merely a short-term interlude before marriage or before children. One of the causes of this prevailing trend, which also unfortunately guides Japanese cultural norms and legislation, can be found in a definition of femininity deeply ingrained in the ‘good wives, wise mothers’ ideology.

On the other hand, the decline in fertility and marriage rates and the rise in the number of divorces in Japan are often attributed to the consequences of gains in women’s independence; therefore, any alternative lifestyle for Japanese women is considered dangerous and threatening. One need only remember Crown Princess Masako, a Western-educated, independent woman on the diplomatic track who gave up her career to marry the Crown Prince. Perpetually under stress, what the imperial household refers to as an “adjustment disorder” (Shima and Kitano 2013) to royal life (which has lasted more than ten years) and unable to produce a male heir, Masako has all but vanished from public view. Western influences are often perceived to be the root cause of Japanese women’s ‘abandonment’ of family life, and one might recall the same accusations made towards New Women in the early-twentieth century in the West and against Aurelia’s abandonment of the Jones family in *Emma*. Indeed, some conservative politicians have even pushed to revise Article 24 of the

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Japanese constitution, which outlines gender equality as a constitutional right and gives women such rights as owning property and divorce.<sup>11</sup> Attacking coeducational curricula, women's reproductive choices, criticising sex education and championing family values became, in Japan and across the world, convenient fronts for anti-feminism.

This animosity towards working women has led to the politicisation of the middle-class housewife in contemporary Japan. A modernisation of the 'good wives, wise mothers' maxim, the so-called 'professional housewife' in Japan, affords a legitimate, credentialised role for women, reinforced by cultural and governmental ideologies concerning reproduction, families and the home. While a Japanese housewife's domestic work and duties remain largely the same as a housewife's anywhere, "they have been 'crafted' in ways which allow considerable pride and responsibility to accrue to their successful accomplishment" (Hendry 1993: 226).

In addition to bolstering the status of her 'professional' husband, the professional housewife can contribute to Japan's political life by joining "*fujinkai*" or "women's groups" that advocate for social reforms over issues such as consumer protection, clean water or anti-nuclear legislation that would benefit women through an improvement of family life (Hendry 1993: 226). Official groups, such as the Japan Housewives Association or the award-winning and long-acting Seikatsu Club Consumers' Co-operative (see Hendry 1993: 236), are powerful, political entities in certain regions of Japan and certainly inspired many women to enter into national politics, a positive phenomenon that Yuko Kunihiro has described as the "housewife-ization" of Japanese political life (Kunihiro 2011: 363). Despite the extension of domestic influence into the public sphere, however, whatever power a housewife accrues is not her own: as Japanese feminist Aoki Yayoi cautions, "any power a modern Japanese housewife has is delegated to her and can be withdrawn" (Yayoi 1997: 6). Much like the housewives in *Emma* and the housewife that Emma will soon become, "housewife feminists" in Japan tend to "work within rather than against, normative constructions of gender by emphasizing their moral authority as mothers" (Bullock 2010: 3 and 169). And like the housewives of *Emma*, Japanese housewives' public influence can be terminated if they are ejected from the household.

*Emma*, I believe, *could* mark a serious attempt to imagine alternative lifestyles for Japanese women – past and present – that involve a wage

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without putting radical undue pressure on conservative patriarchal norms. After all, in addition to her charisma and beauty, it is Emma's paid labour that powerfully separates her from the other housewives in the text and from the girls of Hakim's harem, who can only bear silent witness to the drama of their more liberated British sisters. However, all *Emma* extends, at the end, is an endorsement of housewife feminism, which leaves readers, like myself, wondering if that is enough. While the original manga series ended with the couple's introduction to society, Mori was forced by her readers and editors to conclude the story in a spin-off series, *Emma: Further Tales* (2007-2008), with Emma, now a New Woman, the manga visually suggests, thoughtfully, perhaps even reluctantly, marrying William "at the beginning of the twentieth century" (Mori 2007 (10): 5).

In the final chapters of the expanded series, entitled 'The New Era', the reader is made acutely aware that Emma's carnivalesque wedding day only temporarily removes class distinctions and that marriage to William means divorce from membership in either class. Punctuated by large scenes of revelry with neither frames nor gutters, suggesting a lack of class boundaries, it remains unclear how Emma has achieved acceptance and upward mobility: were these earned as a result of her hard work or the relative passivity of traditional romance? Marrying William does not dismantle the oppressive system of private property in which Emma, as a servant and now wife, has become enmeshed. The marriage merely emphasises the double exploitation of Emma's body: first as a waged worker and now, as a housewife. Possessively kissed by William in the last scenes of the manga, her face at times inscrutable, it becomes difficult to see Emma alleviated from the repetitive time of her domestic work. Perhaps, her seduction into housewifery was an issue that Mori wanted to defer.

#### **4. Maid in Japan: (Neo-)Victorian Maid Cafés**

The growth of maid cafés, which brings the phenomenon of cosplay into the work place, underscores the latest turn in the persistence of 'good wives, wise mothers' in young Japanese women's participation in the economy and relationship to labour. Maid cafés appeared in earnest around the 2000s in Tokyo's popular but seedy Akihabara district, part of a larger boom in so-called concept cafés. Not all maid café maids trade in the Victorian, but many are recognisably Victorian-themed: *Victorian Café Emily*, of course, but also *M's Melody Café* in Nagoya; *Cure Maid Café*, one of the most

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established maid cafés in Akihabara; *Culture Café Schatzkiste*; and perhaps the most forthright, *Victorian Fashioned Style Wonder Parlour Café* in Tokyo. Moreover, Victorian-themed maid cafés have now popped up in urban centres around the world from the Philippines to Melbourne, to Moscow and across the United States. However short-lived the establishment, international maid cafés make visible alternative forms of soft power deployed in the service of Japan's cultural imperialism and, where available, can be considered as an expression of a global neo-Victorianism.

Employing mainly young women between the ages of 18 and 25, maid cafés in general offer their primarily male customers a range of interactive non-sexual activities centred on service. According to an article published by Patrick Galbraith in *Metropolis Magazine*, so popular have maid cafés become as places of employment that as many as 300 applicants may vie for a single position at the more than 200 cafés throughout Japan. Although baseline salaries are low and the work unregulated by contracts, Galbraith reports that girls are seduced by the promise of “idol” status in the cosplay or entertainment industry (Galbraith 2009: para. 8). Unlike hostess clubs, maid cafés trade on youth, innocence and an ideology of ‘*kawaii*’ (cuteness); maids are never to be touched by customers lest there be any misunderstandings concerning their role(play).

Upon entering a maid café, a customer will be greeted with a hearty ‘Welcome home Master!’ (or ‘Mistress!’) by a chorus of enticing young women dressed in maid costumes. When leaving, a customer may be asked when s/he expects to ‘come back home’, further emphasising the idea that to be ‘at home’ lies in the stability and simplicity of one’s role as master/mistress or servant. Café décor ranges from cosy living room settings where tea and cakes are served, to more modern spaces where customers can sing karaoke and play games or take commemorative pictures with their favourite maids as souvenirs of a supposedly authentic experience in a unique place (Galbraith 2011: para. 28). In addition to serving food and beverages, maid cafés pride themselves on providing intimacy and comfort or “soul care” in the form of conversation, drinking games, teasing, pranks and other forms of entertainment (Galbraith 2011: para.19).<sup>12</sup> Read within the context of neo-Victorianism, however, maid cafés can assume a complicated variation on the Victorian notion of separate spheres: both customers and employees labour to create intimacy in a public space that

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imitates the domestic, a haven purchased to provide its young female employees and its (predominantly male) customers with a temporary escape from both work and home.

Arguably, maid cafés simply replicate the undefined boundaries of paid domestic work with its endless litany of chores and coerced forms of caring. For example, ‘Mirai’, a blogger for the entertainment site SGCafe.com, refutes the more glamorous, role-playing aspects of being a maid, announcing instead that it is “not an easy job” because it imitates housework:

Job scope includes: cooking, (try having oil sticking to your face with all the makeup), washing dishes, house-keeping chores, serving and entertaining customers. Sometimes, I even feel like a real domestic maid! To top it off, after doing all the household chores, you still have to look pretty and smile 101% of the time. (Mirai 2011)

While Mirai’s legitimate complaints do not confirm whether or not cosplay and other performative practices, coupled with labour, allow for agency or enable identity play, the artificial environment of maid cafés denaturalises the economy of housework without explicitly violating the patriarchal Meiji/Victorian norms that can still be traced in the present throughout everyday practice, in political discourse, and in governmental policy.

There may not be anything particularly ‘Victorian’ about maid cafés, even those that are explicitly themed as such. Their delightful historical inaccuracy resonates with Frederic Jameson’s postmodern lament that we have forgotten how to think historically and so turn to haphazardly cannibalising styles of the past in compensation (Jameson 1991:18). Even in their appearance, neo-Victorian maids offer patrons little more than a brief Victorian romance rooted in the practicalities of consumption and display. Yet maid cafés with their menus of services, prices and time limits can potentially open a conversation about what *Emma* often refuses to discuss: that domestic labour, even if highly performed, can be conceived of as part of the general economy and not a separate mode of production.

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### 5. *Emma: My Victorian Romance*

I close with a final set of images that capture the experience of reading *Emma* and Japanese maid culture. Thematically an important detail, Emma's spectacles capture both her intelligence and occasional short-sightedness.<sup>13</sup> The narrative lingers over Emma's glasses, originally a gift from Mrs Stowner who diagnoses Emma's initial mistakes correctly as poor eyesight rather than clumsiness. They also serve a metafictional function: for a neo-Victorian graphic narrative that frames and views the Victorian through a Japanese lens, Emma's glasses are crucial. Throughout the series, Emma's glasses are often fetishised for the reader: in one series of panels in Volume 5, Mori directs the reader to linger on disembodied aspects of Emma's maid uniform only to have Emma put on her glasses and return the reader's gaze, redirecting the voyeurism and scopophilia associated with visually encountering the Victorian in the present.<sup>14</sup> However, Emma's glasses and her impaired vision accentuate Mori's own blindness to negativised versions of the Victorian: perhaps because of her "mania for all things English" (Mori 2006 (1): [185]), the series uncritically embraces orientalist imagery and fails to radically re-imagine gender ideologies.

Emma's glasses also point to my own romance, as a neo-Victorianist, with the Victorian. I want Emma's glasses to serve as the manga's corrective neo-Victorian function: to provide a visual commentary on Victorian and colonial, domestic and sexual labour from an invisible 'downstairs' perspective and to provide tangible links between the early feminist movement of the nineteenth century in both Britain and Japan and my supposedly more liberated present. Only once in the series, when Emma is coerced into attending a party as Mrs Trollope's companion, does she go without her spectacles. Outfitted in borrowed finery, Emma manages to "pass for a lady-in-waiting", but she insists, "without these, I can't see at all" (Mori 2006 (4): 147, 146). Emma 'passes' but she does so *passively*; unlike her maid café counterparts, she is forced into the position of an object of spectatorship by her employers rather than acting as an embodied spectator. Both Mrs Mölder and Mrs Trollope try to reassure Emma that "nobody who lays eyes on you will take you as a maid" (Mori 2006 (4): 149). Literally blinded but simultaneously the object of attention, Emma's surprise encounter with William and his fiancée at the party, coupled with the visual deception of her class transgression, causes her to faint from the confusion arising from a contractual crisis: outsourced as a lady's

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companion, an ambiguity emerges over the boundaries of Emma's job description. But might this also be the moment of contractual crisis between Mori and me over what should be the job description of the neo-Victorian maid? After laying eyes on her, I would not take Emma as a maid either – if I was expecting another Grace Marks, Mary Reilly, or Ruth Vigers, ready to disrupt sexual and social boundaries with their access to and exploitation of intimate knowledge, I would not find them here.<sup>15</sup> Enjoyment of *Emma* requires, at times, suspending the neo-Victorian critical apparatus; however, what this reveals is the necessity of being sensitive to the audibility of feminist activism articulated in the return to the Victorian as it goes global.

### Notes

1. Mike Leigh's film, *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), is another exception. The film documents Gilbert and Sullivan's collaboration on *The Mikado* and features Gilbert's visit to an exhibition of Japanese culture and artefacts in 1885. In the film, Gilbert invites Japanese performers from the exhibit to his rehearsals for his English actors to imitate. This small exhibition in Knightsbridge was part of Meiji Japan's "leave Asia" ideology, which took advantage of the West's fascination with *Japonisme* that began with the Great Exhibition of 1851, to create opportunities for trade and industry in the guise of "cultural bridge building" (Checkland 2003: 27, xi). Japan's participation and investment in a series of international World's Fairs and exhibitions culminated in the Japan British Exhibition in London in 1910, an event that symbolically marked Japan's emergence as a modern world power (Checkland 2003: 171-172; Hotta-Lister 1999: 187). *Emma* features an early episode at the Crystal Palace; in Emma's first public outing with William, the pair loses track of time amongst the Exhibit's many wonders and become locked in overnight. Graphically dwarfing the characters, the gutters barely allowing for visual closure, the vastness of Britain's global power serves as the backdrop to the couple's romance, their intimacy framed by British – and Japanese – imperial spectacle.
2. See posts from the "iitrans Translation Group" at: <http://iitrans.secchan.net/img/res/1514.html>.
3. Following the success of *Emma*, Mori authored and illustrated *Shirley* (2003), a series of short stories about another young maid set in the Edwardian era, and is currently serialising *A Bride's Story* (2011-present), set in Central Asia in the early nineteenth century. Mori is often marketed as a *shōjo* author.

Taking advantage of a generation of girls graduating from *shōjo*, the manga industry introduced *josei* manga in the 70s and early 80s, marketed towards women in their twenties and beyond who have entered the workforce. Depicting “less idealized characters” and “more expressive artistic styles”, *josei* manga features “determined women who know exactly what they want in life [...] even if they have to go through some sort of spiritual or physical journey to find their true calling” (Yadao 2009: 71). Despite my focus on *shōjo*, I suspect that *Emma* occupies a unique space between these two genres, allowing Mori to freely explore the conventions of both. *Emma*’s publication history offers no indication of where it belongs: the series was originally serialised in *Comics Beam* magazine, a more art-heavy publication for “comic freaks” and, nominally, for “young men” (Friedman 2012), with a relatively small readership.

4. As *Emma* is a multi-volume series, I will indicate the volume number in parentheses after the publication date. As some of Mori’s ‘Afterword Mangas’ are not paginated, I have included my own page numbers in square brackets counting from the last numbered page in the volume. Textual inconsistencies exist between the English text of the Japanese original, the official English translation of *Emma* published by CMX (now out of print), and online scans of the manga, professionally translated by amateurs and dedicated fans. At times, Jones is spelled “Jounes” and Meredith has been translated as “Mölder” in the online versions. As far as I can tell, these inconsistencies result from each translator’s decision to correct the original for the benefit of their primary reading audiences.
5. See <http://mangafox.me/manga/emma/v06/c040/20.html> and <http://www.victorianlondon.org/mayhew/mayhew-30.gif>.
6. See <http://mangafox.me/manga/emma/v02/c008/2.html>.
7. See <http://mangafox.me/manga/emma/v07/c047/10.html>.
8. Multiple YouTube videos exist that also document the enormous amount of time it takes Mori to illustrate a character: in six 8-minute videos, I counted at least five steps of drawing, inking, tracing, shading and layering that went into a one-page image.
9. Essentially structured by an aesthetics of affect designed to appeal to young girls, *shōjo* was marginalised until it was revived in the 1970s by the so-called ‘24 *num gumi*’ group, a loose collection of female artists who grew up on *shōjo* manga and claim the year Showa 24 (1949) as the year of their birth. Only relatively recently has *shōjo* manga garnered international academic attention (Takahashi 2008: 130).

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10. Another neo-Victorian manga and anime that addresses the male equivalent of maids, this time – butlers – is the supernatural steampunk series, *Black Butler* (Toboso 2009-present). *Black Butler* focuses on the unusual relationship between the young Lord Ciel Phantomhive, the thirteen-year old head of the Phantom toy empire, and his demonic butler, Sebastian. Contracted by blood to protect Ciel, Sebastian’s powers include shape-shifting and extreme strength but also masterful management skills: in the first arc of the story he defeats a chainsaw wielding transvestite demon named Grell Sutcliffe, who is also Jack the Ripper, while also winning a curry cooking contest judged by a hysterical Queen Victoria wearing sunglasses. Like *Emma*, *Black Butler* seems intent on interrogating masculinity and professional roles, rewriting the entrenched figure of the Japanese salaryman (a staple in Japanese manga since Yoshihiro Tatsumi’s adult manga in the 1960s) – a middle-class, heterosexual, married workaholic who has become the dominant representation of men and masculinity in post-war Japan (Roberson and Suzuki 2003: 1). The historical links between the salaryman and the Meiji-era samurai bureaucrat have been well-documented (Frühstück 2011: 97), which makes *Black Butler*’s nineteenth-century setting, its extreme violence and steampunk elements (the ways in which new (Western) technologies threaten gender dichotomies), particularly provocative. *Black Butler*’s gender-bending themes and homosocial, if not homosexual, undertones, and its anxieties about paid service versus servitude might gesture towards a new generation of young Japanese men who self-identify as so-called “herbivores” (Lim 2009), men who opt for low-paying, non-competitive jobs and prefer family and friends to sexual pursuit and are not limited by the cultural expectations of the salaryman profile. While not as ubiquitous as maid cafés, butler cafés are a growing trend catering specifically towards women.
  11. Article 24 of the Japanese constitution, drawn up in 1946, stresses that marriage, including laws governing property rights, divorce, inheritance and matters of the family shall be based on “the dignity of the individual and essential equality of the sexes” (Kogure 2005). In 2005, a faction of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party called for the revision of Article 24’s emphasis on the “individual” which, they claim, has led to an egoism which undermines traditional family values and gender roles (Kogure 2005).
  12. See @home Café’s website, <http://www.cafe-at-home.com/about-english/>, which lists a menu of their services with prices.
  13. Inger Sigrun Brody suggests that Emma’s glasses signal her as a type of New Woman or *jogakusei*, an import from the West to Japan in the late nineteenth-century (Brody 2011: 28). While Brody’s article offers many interesting

insights into *Emma*'s Japanese context, I find her claim that Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) functions as the intertext for Mori's work misguided. Brody's argument that the translation of Austen's novels in Meiji Japan played an important role in helping women articulate a nascent feminism is helpful, but her comparisons between Mori's manga and Austen's fiction are not particularly persuasive.

14. See <http://mangafox.me/manga/emma/v05/c032/23.html>.
15. See Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990), and Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999).

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