

## We Are the Revolution: Review of *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997)

By Alexandra Arana Blas

The character of Utena is revolutionary, as are many characters built around the archetype of the woman dressed as a man. Numerous examples can be found in both Western and Japanese literature and visual culture. For instance, in *Torikaebaya Monogatari*, Himegimi is disguised by her father as her brother Otokogimi in the emperor's court. In *Story of The Nun Lieutenant*, Antonio de Erauso, also known as the Nun Lieutenant, escapes from the convent and travels through Latin America to participate in the conquest. Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* adopts the identity of her brother, Sebastian, to survive. Similarly, Sapphire from *Princess Knight* is born with both a male and female heart. Oscar François de Jarjayes in *The Rose of Versailles* is raised as a man and falls in love with both men (Axel von Fersen, André) and women (Rosalie). Many of these characters are skilled with swords, challenging the rigidity of gender roles and becoming embodiments of both masculine and feminine qualities. They do not reject these gendered polarities, but rather embrace ambiguity, merging both aspects within themselves.

The woman wielding a sword is a revolutionary figure, challenging the reader or viewer in much the same way as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the “tenth muse,” did with her pen. The pen, like a sword, becomes a tool through which women carve out space in the silence of the page. Sor Juana used her writing to express love for the vicereine and to critique the easy flirtations of male poets while mockingly confronting the authorities who sought to silence her.

We cannot overlook how *Revolutionary Girl Utena* draws on these historical and cultural influences. Women with swords, who challenge dichotomies, who do not identify solely with masculinity or femininity, and who fall in love with both men and women, are not new figures in our cultural imagination. These characters bring into question the longstanding belief that bodies must conform to rigid gender norms.

In *Utena*, there are recurring symbols of theatricality (a stage where characters fight with swords, shadow theater), circularity (the roses, the staircase leading to the battlefield, and Utena and Anthy in the opening), and complementarity (masculine and feminine, pink and purple). As Calderón de la Barca suggested in *The Great Theater of the World*, life itself is a performance, and anime often reaffirms this notion through its symbolism. If performance implies artificiality, then why do we continue to cling to the belief that all bodies must align with one specific gender pole?

Finally, like magical girl characters, Utena undergoes a transformation scene in which both her wardrobe and surroundings change. *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, like *mahou shoujo* anime, serves as a metaphor for change and revolution. The youthful spirit of Utena shakes the inertia and conformity often associated with older generations.

Twenty-four years after its debut, the message of this anime remains relevant: to grow up is to question, to overcome, and to strive to create a new society. Have we, as a society, grown up?

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