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**GIRLS ON BOYS ON BOYS:**  
**Subversive Gender Discourses in Boys' Love Manga**

Dissertation submitted to  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Philosophy**

by

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**Certificate**

This dissertation titled “Girls on Boys on Boys: Subversive Gender Discourses in Boys’ Love Manga” submitted by Lakshmi Menon, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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**Declaration by the Candidate**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lakshmi Menon', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

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*To my parents for never asking what I was working on, and to  
my sister, for all the fangirling*

## Acknowledgements

For the longest time I thought that the acknowledgement would be the first thing I wrote. I'm somewhat grateful that this was not the case, because then I wouldn't be able to look back at the journey it's been and let out this sigh of 'oh dear god it's over' relief.

I am grateful to Dr. Saugata Bhaduri for never asking me whether I actually planned on finishing my dissertation, and for giving me the space to work in my own corner of the world until the time came to emerge from it. I'm also grateful to Prof. GJV Prasad for telling me that my topic is "really interesting", because it's always good to know that there is at least one prospective reader of the thirty thousand odd words at the end of the day.

If I were to name everyone else who deserves acknowledgement, it would end up like one of those Oscar acceptance speeches that they play loud music to drown it out. Also, the risk of forgetting someone is too great. So I'll thank everyone who's been through this journey with me (in no particular order): for all the all-night-typing-like-crazy sessions, for sunrise meetings for tea, for patiently listening to my rants of "I can't do this aah", for shooining me away from online time wasting sessions, for promising rewards in kind when I finished, for asking me important theoretical questions (that I hadn't even thought of) two days before submission, for pats on the shoulder and questions of "when do you plan on finishing?", for books and ideas given, for examples set, for helping me push this Sisyphus-ian boulder up the mountain and sitting on it so it would stay down.

And, of course, thank you to all those who made faces of horror on seeing the explicit images contained in this dissertation. The mind of the fangirl is indeed a frightening place.

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## INTRODUCTION

It's not a "hobby"! To me, reading manga is a synonym for "living"!

(Miura Shion 2006: 13)

It is a universally accepted fact that one of the most dangerous places known to humankind is the mind of the fan. Characterised by single minded devotion to their chosen area of interest and prone to actively and enthusiastically demonstrated devotion, fans are considered by the greater part of society to be best left to their own devices in the bizarre world that fandom seems to be to the rest of the world. If the ordinary fan is looked upon in such undesirable terms then it goes without saying that from the distinctly gendered perspective of society, the *fangirl* faces the misfortune of being doubly marginalised into a subculture within a subculture. After all, if fans are characterised as being nerds who cannot hope for any form of a social life and most certainly stand no chances of 'getting the girl', what of the girls who stand within the same social circle as nerds themselves?

Further, if ordinary fangirls of different phenomena in popular culture that are acceptably 'fanned' over such as *Star Trek* or the *Lord of the Rings* are considered a rare and oppressed breed, then what of the subsection of fangirls who are characterised by their tendency to be, in the terminology of anime fandom, *yaoi* fangirls or, as they call themselves, *fujoshi* (rotten girls); girls who can and will find a reason to see homoerotic subtext between characters in any cultural text, even going as far as to find it between public figures ranging from film actors to tennis players. Needless to say, this tendency is not welcomed in all circles of fandom. Especially in the West there is a broad cultural bias that exists against women who enjoy watching male-on-male action. They are generally depicted either as highly unattractive or as 'twisted' and 'abnormal', partially because women with overt interest in sexual matters are subject to a certain degree of social disapproval, but frequently because (usually male) critics are disturbed by female sexuality that does not include the heterosexual male. It is interesting to note that the term *fujoshi* itself indicates a degree of tongue-in-cheek derogation that the girls direct towards themselves. However, regardless of the fact that it is a hobby that is generally frowned upon, young women continue to create, distribute and read Boys' Love manga containing varying levels of explicit sexuality not only in Japan but worldwide and as such this

requires further examination. Over the course of this dissertation, I intend to examine the reasons behind the growth and popularity of the *yaoi* genre both in Japan and outside it with special reference to the psyche of the fangirls who proliferate it.

The broad genre of male homosexual narratives produced by women for women falls under the term Boys' Love (henceforth abbreviated as BL) in Japan, under which two sub-genres of *shounen-ai* and *yaoi* are differentiated by the fact that the latter contains explicit descriptions of the sexual act between men, often taking precedence over any semblance of a plot. In the world of *yaoi* narratives, 'homonormativity' prevails over heteronormativity. Many stories feature couples who face little or no opposition from society for their sexuality, reflecting an ideal society free of prejudice, and also reflective of the Japanese belief in homoerotic relationships being reflective of a 'pure and beautiful' form of romance. Over the course of this dissertation, I intend to examine Boys' Love manga in terms of how they shape, subvert and question norms related to gender and sexuality by envisioning and idealising male homosexuality.

The first question I set out to answer was obviously: Why? Why do women feel the need to create often explicitly pornographic narratives of male homosexual love to express their own sexuality? What is it about the genre that holds such an appeal? Over the course of answering this, my queries branched out to several other aspects of the genre that required examination.

To what extent, to begin with, does the sophisticated history of the evolution of manga as an art form influence BL? Is this a phenomenon unique to only manga or does it have parallels in other forms of art and literature? In my first chapter I trace the rise of manga in Japan, from a historical and socio-economic perspective, to determine what influences have shaped the medium to make it the way it is today. Parallel to the rise of manga since the 1970s has been the rise of Boys' Love as a genre, influenced not only by the concerns prevalent in manga but also the rise of feminist discourse in Japan. It is possible to examine BL from the perspective of western slash narratives, which are similarly romances between fictional characters of the same sex albeit in the form of written stories. However, such an exercise would completely ignore the nuances that manga as a graphic form brings into the equation. Further, slash is a purely western conception and largely an underground phenomenon – before the coming of the internet and fanfiction websites, most of the slash was distributed in the form of 'fanzines' and consequently hard to find, and strict



copyrights prevented the stories from ever entering the mainstream. It is only recently that the influence of slash has begun to permeate popular culture: the television series Torchwood, for instance, a spin of British science-fiction series Dr Who, has a bisexual, immortal hero in the character of Captain Jack Harkness, and has been marketed to reach a female audience as well as a gay one.

Boys' Love, also had its origins in similar fan narratives and were distributed only at conventions, but unlike slash, it has entered Japanese popular culture in a big way. Animated versions of BL manga series are shown on national television channels, there are 'Drama CDs' recorded by famous voice actors, and advertisements for new volumes of popular manga series are found at locations as crowded as public train stations. An entire area of Tokyo's Ikebukuro district, called Otome (literally meaning 'virgin' but used to refer to 'innocent' young women) Road, is considered the fujoshi mecca, with huge signboards advertising different manga and anime series with BL text or subtext. There are even cafes with BL themes for those who prefer a little stimulation of fantasies with their afternoon tea. BL is therefore a cultural phenomenon that is significant enough to warrant further examination.

With this background in place, it is possible to look closely at the texts themselves to see what they reveal, through their storylines and the placement of images therein, about the politics within them. Most BL manga have distinctive dominant and submissive characters in their homosexual couples, referred to as the '*seme*' (attacker) and the '*uke*' (receiver), but they do not necessarily conform to stereotypes of dominant and submissive partners in portrayals of gay relationships. The character who is dominant in bed, the *seme*, is often socially and emotionally dependent on the sexually submissive partner. There are therefore no disempowering or negative connotations attached to the *uke*. Many manga deal with the dichotomies of power between the two individuals in the world outside their relationship – for example in the workplace where one may have a higher ranking than the other – and how that becomes reflected in their sexual politics. The goal of BL manga artists as storytellers is not to confirm or repudiate any stereotypes, but to explore the relationship itself. Sex in BL manga is a means of displaying emotional equality<sup>1</sup> and theorists have argued that this is one of the reasons why the Boys' Love genre appeals to women: in the relationships between men is an equality that they as women can

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<sup>1</sup> See "Straight Women, Queer Texts", by Andrea Wood

only hope to achieve. It is also interesting to note that in most BL manga, female characters are either marginalised or completely invisible unless it is to play the villainous role of one who would thwart the ‘pure love’ of the protagonists.

Given that there is a desire to attain an equality unachievable in the heterosexual equation through the construction of BL worlds, what is examined in Chapter Three is how the women who read these narratives, and the ones who write them, become part of a continuum of fans, living in a community where they can freely share and express their desires. It will examine the question of how the stories are decoded by the women, who refer to themselves as rotten girls, fujoshi, corruptors of texts. The fujoshi identity is very important in that by labelling themselves as rotten they are creating a very specific societal space for themselves. This chapter will discuss the identification politics of the fujoshi when they read BL texts. Do they see themselves in the place of one of the protagonists? Which of the two men would they identify with, the *seme*’ or the *uke*’? And finally, how does all this fit in with the larger discourses of feminist and queer theory?

In trying to find answers to these questions, I have focussed mainly on manga released post-2000. Although it is true that a holistic study of the BL genre requires an examination of texts beginning from its origins in the 70s, the real boom in the fandom came about the 2000s and concerns of both the manga authors and readers have changed. Manga released within the last ten years best reflect the changes that have occurred in BL discourse in recent times. This is primarily because of the growth of the internet as a site for fannish activities, and almost as testament to this fact, for a study of those texts that have not yet been licensed and translated by one of the manga publishing houses in the US, I have used online scanlations<sup>2</sup> as my source.

I will, therefore, attempt in my dissertation to determine how Boys’ Love manga is an expression of female sexuality and desire and creates subversive discourses with regards to gender roles and expectations. I will attempt to see how through ‘playing’ with homoerotic relationships, the fujoshi who buy the texts and the manga artists who create them become part of a kind of common ‘sisterhood’ built on a unique world-view.

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<sup>2</sup> Scanlation: ‘scan’ + ‘translation’, a portmanteau word that is used to describe the fan made translations of manga texts that have not been made available in published form in English or other Western languages. They are released on a non-profit basis by and for fans.

## CHAPTER ONE

### WHIMSICAL PICTURES

Manga, literally meaning ‘whimsical pictures’, is the term used to describe Japanese comic books. The manga industry in Japan is massive, overshadowing the world’s two leading producers of comic books, the US and France. In Japan, manga makes for roughly 20% of magazine sales and 27% of book sales and therefore is singularly the backbone of the Japanese publishing industry, with sales figures as high as five hundred billion yen every year. Crowds of devotees flock to manga exhibitions and festivals, their numbers varying according to the popularity of the artists or titles involved. Manga is distinct in the variety of both its subject matter and its target audience. There are manga for both children and adults on any conceivable topic, ranging from cooking to sports, romance to horror, fishing to childrearing. Manga are classified loosely into categories corresponding to their target age and gender groups: *kodomo* (children), *shoujo* (girls), *shounen* (boys), *seinen* (young adults) and *seijin* (adults). While the categories are not concrete, there is a degree of similarity in manga belonging to the different target audiences; similarities in theme, for instance, or the art style itself. *Shounen* manga, for instance, for young boys, have varied storylines based on anything from alchemy to sports, but they attempt to convey the same values to their readers – such as the importance of teamwork and the qualities of a strong leader, determination and strength of character, the power of believing in oneself and so on – qualities that an upright young man is expected to display in society. Most *shounen* manga protagonists are ordinary young boys who are thrust into extraordinary circumstances and discover within themselves the power to deal with them, a trait that they seek to inculcate in the readers. In terms of art, *shounen* manga pay more attention to action scenes over character design, and the protagonists are generally non-descript. *Shoujo* manga represent a sub-genre entirely for girls and the stories are suitably ‘feminine’, generally love stories. In most *shoujo* manga, the protagonists are charismatic young women who fall in love with brooding, princely, handsome young men. While the vast majority of *shoujo* manga are happily-ever-after fairy tale narratives, many of them make deep observations on self-realization. *Shoujo* manga art is significant in its embellishments and the use of ‘*shoujo* sparkles’ to highlight the beauty of a character. Also common in *shoujo* manga is a feature not as often found in its *shounen* counterpart, the use of nature symbolism.

**“When a western comic walks down the street, he be all, ‘Avengers Assemble!’**

**While a manga walks down the street he’s all, ‘Quick send a twelve year old in S&M gear to combat the monster!’”**

- The Transient Guest, member of the *Comic Book Resources Forum*<sup>1</sup>

What, besides the variety in the intended audience, differentiates manga from western comics? On a very basic level, there isn’t a great degree of distinction. They are both made up of panels containing images and print, both are in graphic media, dialogues and thoughts are represented as speech or thought balloons, and both tend to be trivialised as being for children and lacking in any real value. In *Reading Japan Cool*, however, John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen distinguish four realms in which manga are distinctive from comics: graphics and language, presentation, relationship to other media, and history.

In terms of graphics, manga art has often been said to have a distinct style of its own, not least because it is as a rule entirely in monochrome with the only colour pages specially inserted in bonus publications. In numerous instruction books on ‘how to draw manga’ that litter the market, authors provide step by step details of how characters are drawn in ‘manga style’, using exaggeratedly simplified techniques. However, manga art cannot be said to be uniform and there is no one prototype of a manga character, although manga does have an aesthetic that sets it apart from western artistic styles. The stereotype manga character has wide eyes, an eclectic range of hair colours and styles that defy the laws of gravity and nature, and a petite frame. Not only character drawings but also the content and narrative structure, the arrangement of panels and use of negative space contribute to the creation of what is called ‘manga style’. Manga art is rife with symbolism specific to Japan and the Japanese language. In the case of Tezuka Osamu, ‘the father of modern manga’, the characters themselves are constructed from kanji, the Chinese pictographic alphabet that the Japanese borrow. “The symbols individually are arbitrary, like phonological sounds, but in their configurations, selected symbols together take on meaning. In manga, while the linguistic representation constitutes symbols, much of the graphics involve symbols as well.” (Ingulsrud & Allen, 30). In manga, the graphic and the language component are inextricable in that the text can never be read using the language component alone. Graphics, the language, and the arrangement of panels all contribute to the construction of the manga medium.

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<sup>1</sup> “What is the difference between manga and western comics?” Comic Book Resources forum. [forums.comicbookresources.com/showthread.php?+=375306](http://forums.comicbookresources.com/showthread.php?+=375306). 05-07-2011.

The significance of the panels is the second point of distinction between manga and western comics. While the earliest manga began as four vertically arranged panels called 4-koma, manga today have variations on the pattern of arrangement of the panels. Manga can have anything from six to eight panels to a page, but some have just one or two depending on the theme and flow of the narrative. Fredrick Schodt, manga researcher, observes that “manga tends to be more expansive than American comics, as a single scene may take two or three times as many panels.” (31) While the application of these techniques depend on the genre of manga, the fact remains that manga artists employ a greater degree of freedom while manipulating the shape, size and dispersion of the panels. It is also to be noted that the majority of manga has strong narrative structures and go for serial publication. Also significant is that manga is mostly presented in monochrome with only the occasional addition of ‘bonus colour pages’.

Manga remains, regardless of the fact that Japanese popular culture has been overrun with anime, video games, television dramas and the internet, the backbone of the Japanese publishing industry and this is the third factor that makes it distinct. The reason for this is the fact that all these genres of popular culture complement each other one some way. Manga has become one of Japan’s most significant and unique cultural exports. Manga art, translated into anime form, has become the core of Japan’s ‘soft power’ movement. The manga aesthetic shows itself in various aspects of Japanese popular culture. For instance, Internet cafes are called manga *kissa* (manga cafes) even though manga is not the only media accessed by their users. The genres also intersect in some cases. For instance, the manga series *Tennis no Oujisama* (The Prince of Tennis) has been adapted into an anime and live action film, and is also the subject of a series of successfully running stage musicals.

Besides these, the fourth factor that sets manga apart from western comics is its history. There are two approaches that can be used to trace the origins of manga. The first is a cultural-historical approach that traces the origins of manga to the painting and woodblock traditions of medieval and early-modern Japan. The other is a socio-economic approach that names the events of World War II and what followed as being the specific conditions leading to the evolution of this unique art form. Both the approaches to the history of manga fall well into the *Nihonjinron*, the discourse on

Japanese national identity. *Nihonjinron* has been defined as the attempt to encapsulate the essential configurations of qualities that mark a population as distinct in itself and from its neighbours. The historical approach adds to the discourse because it shows how manga grew out of a long, particular history of cultural development. The socio-economic approach parallels the growth of manga with Japan's distinct economic growth, and therefore furthers the argument of the uniqueness of manga vis-à-vis Japanese cultural identity.

Three historical threads led to the development of manga. The first is the indigenous drawing tradition that can be traced to the seventh century drawings of gods and demons on the walls and ceilings of temples. The more famous of these were drawn onto scrolls, incorporating elements of caricature and satire, in the twelfth century and were owned by the richer sections of society. The format of the drawings and paintings on scrolls can be considered as significant to the development of modern manga as the caricature in the works. It was for the first time that graphics and writing were both incorporated in a single visual field. Tezuka Osamu names one set of such scrolls, the *Choujuu Giga* (Humorous Animal Pictures) as having much in common with techniques of modern manga. However, the scrolls were by no means part of 'popular culture', being accessible to a very specific section of society. It was only with advancements in printing that published material became available to a larger audience. In the peace that the Edo Period (1603-1868) brought with it, woodblock printing became a popular mode of publishing. Many woodblock artists set the precedent for sequential panels in manga by employing the format of multiple panels on one sheet of paper. The credit for being the art tradition that most influenced manga, however, is given to what is called *kibyoshi*, a kind of picture book that dates to the eighteenth century and shares with manga humorous, satirical and romantic themes. Adam L. Kern does not believe that the *kibyoshi* was a direct forerunner of manga but agrees that it also proves the Japanese willingness to mix words and pictures in a popular storytelling medium. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the first Western influence on comic art came in the form of single-panel cartoons in publications like the *Japan Punch*. Western comic books were also translated into Japanese around this time, titles like *Bringing up Father* and *Felix the Cat*. These were significant in introducing Japanese artists into comic conventions which they would absorb and adapt in developing their own works.

As per the socio-economic view about the development of manga, it is considered that it was in post-World War II Japan that modern manga developed. The main reasons for this were political; the war changed the political discourse in the country. The US Occupation laid heavy censorship laws on publishing of any material that could be seen as pro-Japan nationalist, specifically prohibiting art and writing that glorified war and militarism. It did not forbid the publishing of other material such as manga, and this directly led to a growth in artistic creativity in this medium. There was also increased access to American popular culture which acted as a stimulus to the development of Japanese media. It is during this period that Tezuka Osamu published his first work, reworking Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* into the manga *Shin Takarajima* (New Treasure Island) which, despite the post-war economic downturn, became a bestseller with more than four hundred thousand copies sold in 1947. *New Treasure Island* contained the germs of a new syntax for manga and had an enormous impact on a new generation of manga artists. Even contemporary manga artists trace their style back to Tezuka, who was the first to use cinematographic techniques in the timing and placement of panels. Tezuka revolutionised the idea of manga storytelling with regard to techniques, treating manga as an important medium of communication. Of his own style, the 'god of manga' says,

Until that time, most manga [...] were drawn from a two-dimensional perspective, and in the style of a stage play. The interactions of actors appearing from stage left and stage right were composed as if from the viewpoint of someone seated in the audience. I came to the realization that there was no way to produce power or psychological description using this approach, so I began to introduce cinematic techniques into my composition. The models for this were the German and French movies I saw in my days as a student. I manipulated close-ups and angles, of course, and tried using many panels or even many pages in order to capture faithfully movements and facial expressions that previously would have been taken care of with a single panel. So I would end up with long works five- or six-hundred to more than a thousand pages in length in no time at all [...] Also, I thought the potential of manga was more than getting a laugh; using themes of tears and sorrow, anger and hatred, I made stories that didn't always have happy endings. (qtd in Thorn, 2007)

In terms of storyline as well, Tezuka's manga represented the changing mindset of the people in post-War Japan, as seen in what is considered his most seminal work, *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy). The young boy-robot protagonist of this manga represents a Japanese sociality and community-oriented masculinity differing very

much from the Emperor-worship and militaristic obedience enforced during the previous period of Japanese imperialism. Also published during this period was Hasegawa Machiko's *Sazae-san*, that chronicles the tale of a housewife whose life echoes that of thousands of families affected by the war. *Sazae-san* is a strong female character – something almost unheard of in the realm of Neo-Confucianist principles of feminine meekness – who faces the world cheerfully. Hasegawa's focus on female experience and daily life characterised later *shoujo* manga.

The 1960s saw a significant economic growth in Japan, and the country flourished under the boom. The increased wealth of the people had a direct effect on the manga industry: children's allowances grew, giving them more buying power. They could now afford to buy manga for themselves rather than have their parents buy it for them. As a result, the manga industry shifted from monthly manga magazines to weekly ones to keep up with the rising demand and increasing impatience on the part of readers to continue storylines. Manga magazines developed into their present format of over five hundred pages and, like *Weekly Shounen Jump* which even receives an English translation, remain hugely popular even today.

It was therefore post the 1960s that manga rose to its present form and popularity. While there had always been comics for girls and boys, they could now afford to branch out further into sub-sections of society. Since Japanese culture has very specific spheres for 'girls' culture' and 'boys' culture', it was not long before there arose manga to cater to those vastly different spheres. Tezuka Osamu was influential in creating one of the first manga targeted at a female readership, the first *shoujo* manga for young girls – *Ribbon no Kishi* (Knight in Ribbons or *Princess Knight*) in 1953. Early *shoujo* manga followed certain formulaic plots. The main themes included soap-opera dramas of mother-daughter relationships, stories of girls rising to stardom, and love stories. The narrative structure tended to be melodramatic and predictable Harlequinesque soap-opera romances. When *shoujo* manga followed its male-oriented counterpart into weekly magazine publications, there was room for the emergence of new artists and altogether new developments in the field of manga. Until the 1970s, even manga aimed at teenage girls was produced by men who more or less failed at capturing the interest of their audience with their Cinderella story narratives of abused young heroines who led miserable lives until rescued by the



handsome young man who was everything she had been waiting for, the ideal 'prince' figure. Needless to say, narratives that revolved so heavily around the dependence of the heroines on men did not go down well with the intended readership – a readership that was already oppressed to saturation by the institutions limiting their autonomy in Japanese society. It is therefore unsurprising that the real changes in manga for girls came about at roughly the same time as the advent of feminism in Japan. As women began to contribute to the workforce and lead lives outside the domestic space, it became possible for them to speak out against an oppressively patriarchal society. The realisation of the obstacles between them and self-realisation found reflection in girls' comics of the 70s as more women entered the industry and began to deal with the taboos that became part and parcel of being female. Significant in this regard is the 24 Year Group (*24 nen gumi*, named for the fact that they were all born in the year 24 of the Showa era in the Japanese calendar), a group of artists who all published controversial works that are now considered classics of girls' comics. The members of this informal group acknowledged the fact that through comics they could create a space where writers could express their thoughts freely, where their protagonists could speak for them. They broadened the sphere of the manga beyond the fairy tale-esque stories by addressing adult themes and using literary techniques to convey them. Ôshima Yumiko's *Tanjou* (Birth) dealt with teen pregnancy while her *Jokaa e* (To Joker) was an allegorical love triangle involving a boy who is accidentally transformed into a girl. However, what kept the new breed of artists connected to the tradition of girls' manga was the fact that love stories remained the pivot around which they revolved; only they now followed different patterns from the previously attempted formulae. The stories often dealt with gender and sexuality in ways they had not been portrayed before. In 1972, Ikeda Riyoko, one of the 24 Year Group, published *Berusaiyu no Bara* (The Rose of Versailles), a manga about a fictional character in the court of Louis XVI of France, Oscar François de Jarjayes, a girl raised as a man to become her father's successor as leader of the Palace Guards. The character of Lady Oscar, a woman 'playing male' and admired openly by the women of the court and romantically involved with men, represented the love for androgyny and questioning of gender norms that manga writers of the time were engaged in. The central love story, of the masculine Oscar and her childhood friend Andre, may have inspired the first homosexual romances that began the Boys' Love genre.

*Shoujo* manga are significant in that they helped create a space where women could express themselves without male intervention. They even developed specific stylistic and artistic conventions that could only be understood fully by other women readers of manga. In *shoujo* manga, large eyes, full-body portraits, complex page designs, and free-floating text form the basic visual language of the genre, used to convey the inner feelings of the characters and to invite the readers to identify with them. It is this secret world of *shoujo* manga that provided the right space in which women took expressing themselves to the next level with the advent of Boys' Love manga.

The specialized visual language of *shoujo* manga has often not been understood by male readers; one could say that *shoujo* manga functioned as a secret code that allowed girls to become absorbed in the intimate world of *shoujo* culture. Only those with the ability to decipher the code were welcomed into that private realm, to share girls' concerns with love, family, human relations, or their interest in fashion and trendiness. Thus, girls used the visual idiom of *shoujo* manga to quietly exclude those who did not understand the *shoujo*.

(11, Ingulsrud and Allen, 2009)

It has already been discussed that manga possesses an aesthetic that sets it apart from other forms of comic book art. In *shoujo* manga, that aesthetic is represented by characters drawn in highly exaggerated fashion, with enormous, sparkling eyes often occupying as much as one third of the face. Their hair is often blond and curly and their legs are long and extremely thin. They represent a kind of Japanese ideal of the Caucasian woman and for that reason often lack the high noses and ample breasts and hips of actual Caucasians. The reason behind this is to create a narrative space outside of the everyday experience. Also unique to manga is the *bishounen* aesthetic. *Bishounen* is a term that literally means 'beautiful boy' and refers to a young man whose beauty transcends gender. The *bishounen* is typically slender, with clear skin and feminine facial features such as high cheekbones, but retaining a clearly ideal male body. Gregory M. Pflugfelder in "Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse" sees the *bishounen* as "aesthetically different from both women and men [...] both the antithesis and the antecedent of adult masculinity" (40). The androgyny of *bishounen* characters furthers the argument about gender fluidity in manga and further helps in explaining the origins of the Boys' Love genre.

**“Modern Japan, it may be argued, is less homophobic than most Western societies.”**

- Gary Leupp, *Male Colors, the Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan*

In the introduction to *Queer Japan*, an anthology of interviews with Japanese gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual individuals, Barbara Summerhawk gives an extremely bleak impression of queer life in Japan and talks about the difficulties members of the community face in “the identity development process” (2). Mark McLelland, however, takes issue with this contention on a number of grounds, the first being that the simple fact that homosexuals in Japan lead a closeted life does not necessarily make them miserable. He also points out that it is rather erroneous to imagine that there is such a thing as a “universal gay identity” and therefore the imposition of western models of gay/lesbian identity formation on Japanese society would be wrong as well. In Japan, homosexuality has developed along very specific historical lines which distinguishes it from ‘gayness’ in the Western context. The representation of homoeroticism permeates Japanese popular culture to a very great degree for this long-standing acceptance of same-sex relations and the Japanese viewpoint towards sex itself.

The earliest records of homosexual relationships in Japan come from the period before the Meiji Restoration of 1868; sexual relations between men were not only accepted and acknowledged but raised to the level of a *do*, a ‘way’. Buddhism had an important role to play in making this possible: since heterosexual desire was forbidden among monks, and considered an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, the desires of monks and priests was directed towards their *chigo*, or acolytes. The term continued to be in use to the Heian period (794-1185), when it was used to refer to beautiful boys who danced at festivals and other gatherings. In medieval Japan, when *bushido* or the way of the samurai became the order of the day, the word *chigo* came to mean the younger homosexual partner in a Buddhist setting. All through the Edo period that came before the Meiji Restoration, samurai values dominated society, and with them came into acceptance the process of pederasty that became idealised as a “more spiritual, supreme and aesthetic form of relationship” in comparison to the mere physicality of heterosexual relations. With the Meiji Restoration and the opening of Japanese ports to Western influences and Christian missionaries, homophobia began to infiltrate society, but never to the extent that it exists outside the country.

Wim Lunsing, who has worked with gay and lesbian groups, points out that in Japan, hardly anyone can say what is *wrong* with homosexuality, and there is thus greater scope for its acceptance.

But even in speaking of ‘acceptance’, there is the question of what exactly is accepted by the society with regards to homosexual identity and what is not, because, as McLelland points out, there is hardly a notion of ‘coming out’ as gay in Japanese society. Such a declaration of taking a stance that is possibly “in opposition to mainstream lifestyle and values” is considered undesirable by many members of the gay/lesbian community, and thus neither the act nor the likelihood or the lack of toleration of this ‘coming out’ by society is an indicator of the acceptance of homoeroticism in Japanese society. The complex relationship of homoeroticism to Japanese social values has to be located elsewhere and otherwise than our West-induced notions of the same.

Although the society remains relatively conservative when it comes to gay or lesbian discourses, homosexual erotica is not a completely unknown concept in Japan. Androgyny and gender-bending were therefore nothing new to the Japanese public, and the Boys’ Love genre found its niche in this society. There has been in fact quite a long tradition of fictionalised male same-sex romances for a wider, at least partially female, audience. Even the hero of Lady Murasaki’s eleventh century novel *The Tale of Genji*, who was otherwise famously heterosexual, indulges in an affair with another man in the narrative. Stories about same-sex relationships among samurai and Buddhist priests and their acolytes were common in the feudal era. There are woodblock prints, *ukiyo-e*, that illustrated and celebrated such relationships. In Japan, there has long been a fascination with androgyny and the liminality of gender, which is further explored in the kabuki tradition of *onnagata*, with male actors playing female roles. The desirability of *onnagata* actors and adolescent male *wakashugata* actors was described and circulated widely in theatrical critiques throughout Japan’s history of intellectual production. The coming of Western influence and homophobia lessened the older traditions, but kabuki remained, and the all female *Takarazuka* theatre emerged into popularity, pushing gender boundaries with women playing impossibly beautiful male roles.

It was during the period of flowering of *shoujo* manga under the innovations of the 24 Year Group that the first step into the Boys' Love genre took place. In an attempt to break convention even further than they already were, writers attempted to put boys into the role of protagonists in girls' manga, with homosexual relationships between young boys becoming the focus of the stories. Takemiya Keiko's *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (The Song of the Wind and Trees) and Hagio Moto's *Toma no Shinzou* (The Heart of Thomas) are, according to researcher Matt Thorn, the first girls' manga to portray romantic and sexual relationships between boys. Both the manga are set in the surreal atmosphere of an all-boys boarding school. *Toma no Shinzou* stages the conflicts of three boys – Erich, Yuri and Oscar – over the death of Thomas, the school idol. The reason for his suicide is revealed to be his love for Yuri, who rejected him. The entry of Erich, a transfer student who looks exactly like Thomas, allows Yuri to confront his own feelings. It is revealed over the course of the manga that the reason behind Yuri rejecting Thomas in the first place was because he had undergone traumatic sexual abuse and believed himself unworthy of love. *Kaze to Ki no Uta* is a recollection of the memories of a wealthy Frenchman named Serge of his time spent at a boarding school and his relationship with Gilbert, a fellow classmate known for his sexual prolificacy. The manga is not only explicit in its depictions of sex, it also further deals with the dark themes that Hagio touches upon such as homophobia, rape and drug abuse and its culmination is distinctly dark and rather disturbing. However, a glance at the character designs in both the manga, particularly that of Gilbert with his feminine, elfin features, shows that at this early stage, Takemiya and Hagio, like many that followed in their tradition, drew and described their protagonists with what the Japanese refer to as 'sex-scentless'; they are identifiably masculine but lack masculine sexuality. The reasons for this are examined by Suzuki Kazuko, who states that one of the purposes of the 24 Year Group was to portray ideal human relationships beyond trappings of gender, hence the experimentation with alternative sexualities. Also, the lack of explicitly sexual forms of the character furthers their argument that in a perfect world, one's sex should not determine in any way the way one lives one's life.



Fig. 1.1

Gilbert and Serge in *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, are androgynous in appearance and appear as nearly sexless figures.

(Takemiya, Keiko. *Kaze to Ki no Uta*. Vol. 5. Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1979)

Despite the ‘angelic’ almost sexless qualities of the characters in early *shounen-ai* narratives, the stories were able to bring about a distinctive shift in the point of view of its readers; the awareness that the male could also be seen as an object of sexual desire. In keeping with the feminist tradition that the *shounen-ai* manga artists drew inspiration from, there came to be for the first time the idea of seeing not only women as pure romantic ideals of innocence but men as well; the boys in *Kaze to Ki no Uta* and *Toma no Shinzou*, regardless of their sexual depravity, maintain their ‘innocence’ by being honest to themselves, wanting to be loved by only one person alone. This theme, as well as the shifting of the gaze from the male to the female and the ‘objectification’ of men over women became significant in shaping the next era in homoerotic narratives in manga.

While the 24 Year Group was vastly significant in its achievements and innovations, their audience began to display a degree of dissatisfaction with the sometimes too allegorical narratives full of ungraspable, abstract notions, as well as the androgynous protagonists of *shounen-ai* works. As the girls reading the manga came to terms with their own sexuality and with seeing the male form as the object of desire, the character designs in Boys’ Love works changed to more ‘manly’ figures

(albeit still in the *bishounen* tradition). The wispy, willowy protagonists of *Kaze to Ki no Uta* gave way to men who could charm women with their masculine bodies. This development occurred in conjunction with the beginning of the Boys' Love sub-genre known as *yaoi*, which focussed on the explicit depiction of sexual acts, mostly foregoing any semblance of a plot.

The beginnings of *yaoi* can be traced parallel to the growth of the genre of slash fiction in the West: just as slash propagated most widely with the glory days of the science-fiction television series, *Star Trek*, and the fan made pair of Captain James Kirk and his First Officer Spock (which, when abbreviated into Kirk/Spock, gave rise to the term 'slash' itself) about whom stories were written and published in underground 'fanzines', the next step in the progression of comic book boy on boy narratives is in the form of amateur comics or *doujinshi* which essentially reworked characters from pre-existing manga and anime stories and placed them in homoerotic settings. These characters were drawn from manga series targeted towards boys and were, as far as the canon from which they came was concerned, as heterosexual as they could be. For instance, some of the best selling amateur comic books at the semi-annual Tokyo Comic Market<sup>2</sup> are the ones based on anime and manga series meant for boys. Today there are a vast number of highly popular titles that are used as bases for these works, series such as *Naruto*, *Dragonball* and *One Piece*, but in the early stages of *doujinshi*, it was the football based series *Captain Tsubasa*.

Like many manga meant for boys, *Captain Tsubasa* had a cast consisting almost entirely of male characters who, being in a narrative about football and how love for the game brings people together, develop over the course of the story bonds of deep friendship and camaraderie. The girls who read *Captain Tsubasa* saw in these bonds the potential for something more than mere platonic bonding. The pairing of Hyuuga Kojiro and Wakashimazu Ken from one of the protagonist's rival teams particularly caught the eye of a large number of artists, many of whom began their careers by drawing manga involving them. The *doujinshi* were not long, having been hand drawn and photocopied for distribution, and for the most part involved heavily graphic descriptions of sex interspersed with a few pages of 'bonding' between the characters. The term *yaoi* that came into use around this time, refers to the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> The Tokyo Comic Market is the biggest confluence of amateur artists and writers in Japan. They meet and sell comic books, fiction, illustrations and so forth, mostly fan works.

some of these takeoffs did not purport to be fully developed stories, but were rather just scenes and snippets. The term *yaoi*, it must be noted, is an acronym of the phrase ‘*yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*’, translated into ‘no peak, no point, no climax’. What constituted the high point of the story was usually a scene in which the two male protagonists are brought by circumstances into physical contact with each other. There is an awkward moment, and then one makes an aggressive move, perhaps initiating a kiss. The other resists, but it is clear that the feelings between them are mutual. Some artists will end the scene here, preserving the tension between the two. Others will treat readers to several pages of skin, tangled sheets, sweat, and other bodily fluids. By the *Captain Tsubasa doujinshi* era, *yaoi* began to show characteristics that Suzuki Kazuko identifies as giving impetus to the Boys’ Love movement. The first is magazines published by *doujinshi* circles<sup>3</sup> in which a major forum for *yaoi* could be developed. There is a great degree of freedom of expression within them, due to the fact that there are no social restrictions of the kind that were placed on other mass media such as commercial magazines and television programmes. The second factor is that teenagers, who formed the majority of the readership of *yaoi* and also actively created texts of their own, helped increase the number of people involved in *yaoi* activities by word of mouth. Third, *yaoi doujinshi* did not require any special equipment or knowledge of story construction and setting for the creation of a narrative. Anyone could write *yaoi* as long as they had knowledge of the animated series or comic from which the characters and settings were being borrowed. Fourth, when the characters in *yaoi* became closer to the ages of the readers, they became more accessible to the readers who could associate with them better than the protagonists of the 24 Year Group’s manga.

Suzuki also outlines three stages to the development of Boys’ Love manga. The first stage, from the end of the 1970s to the mid 1980s, was a period during which BL was adopted to caricature male sexuality and “take revenge” on men. From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, the second stage was one through which writers sought ideal human relationships between equal individuals, lending a degree of seriousness to the stories. From the 1990s to the present, BL becomes commonplace enough in manga for “ordinary” writers to employ elements of it in their work.

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<sup>3</sup> A *doujinshi* circle is a group of artists who work together to create *doujinshi* based on a common popular cultural text.



Nagaike Kazumi believes that the modern era of BL began in the 1990s, and traces in part some of the major developments that have taken place in the genre since then. The reason she gives for the sudden influx of changes is that commercial BL publications, rather than fan made *doujinshi*, have taken prominence since the start of the 90s, and with publication in established magazines comes a widening of the market. Boys' Love manga today have moved beyond limiting themselves to amateur *doujinshi* and borrowed characters. While fan works based on existing characters still remain and sell quite well on the markets, BL has entered the mainstream and there are original works as well that have begun to take the spotlight. These are genuine stories, often with plots stretching over many volumes. Kubota Mitsuyoshi suggests that *yaoi* as a name came to the creators of the stories when they came to realise that their stories, "depicting subtle human relationships in a timeless, existential manner in narratives with minimal development, accurately reflected the rhetorical patterns intrinsic to the name *yaoi*. In a *yaoi* story, the romantic/sexual encounters happen without fanfare and fade away in the conclusion" (283).

BL manga started making their appearance on foreign bookshelves in translated form, making the genre more global than it had previously been. There also developed new technologies that allowed texts to be transformed and distributed in alternative media forms. For instance, Drama CDs are audio dramatisations of a particular text, performed by professional voice actors. They often follow the plot of the manga they are adapting, complete with auditory versions of the explicit sex scenes in the text. OVAs are Original Video Animations, direct-to-release animated versions of BL manga, designed for personal viewing and not for public broadcasting or theatrical release. A number of popular manga are made into animation works for television channels, and live action films based on or inspired by different BL works have also started to appear. Nagaike also talks about the number of authors who publish not only in the BL genre but others as well, branching out their work and gaining much deserved recognition and visibility. Another significant development was the fact that the term *fujoshi*, literally meaning a "rotten girl", and coined in reference to the fans of boy-on-boy romances, came into popular usage. There is also a greater diversification in terms of graphic styles, settings and storylines, and significant improvements in character design.

This chapter has therefore outlined the historical and socio-economic approaches to the development of manga and how it fits into the larger space of Japanese culture. It has also shown how Boys' Love emerged as a genre out of *shoujo* manga and how it developed from its 'chaste' origins to the 'porn without plot' narratives of the *yaoi* stories of today. It also touched in brief on some of the reasons why women create BL and a few of its conventions. The coming chapters will be looking at BL as a form of female expression and possibly pornography, and examine the implications of this on the reading of the genre itself.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GAYTOPIAS

It has already been established that BL firmly follows the *bishounen* aesthetic where the protagonists, while both obviously male, exude an air of androgynous beauty. This is not to say, however, that their androgyny draws into question their masculinity or problematises their ‘maleness’. The characters in BL manga are drawn from every walk of life, and the most popular stories are the ones about characters from distinctly male worlds such as that of the *yakuza* (the Japanese mafia) or ‘salarymen’, office workers in usually mundane jobs. These overtly male worlds are ‘queered’ in the manga with illicit tales of relationships between members of rival *yakuza* families or office romances between supervisors and secretaries. The element of the forbidden, it can be said, is one factor that draws readers to BL texts. There is a sense of breaking taboo by indulging in homoerotic fantasy literature, and this is furthered by the nature of the relationships in the literature itself. For this reason, rape and incest often feature heavily in *yaoi* manga, perhaps because of the freedom that is accorded by already transgressing one boundary in fantasising about men with other men.

***“I’m in a gay relationship, my partner is four years my junior and worse than that, I, despite all my pride, am an uke.”***

- Kamijou Hiroki, *Junjou Romantica*

An important convention in Boys’ Love manga is the division of characters into ‘dyads’ of a sexual top and bottom, a dominant and submissive, penetrating and penetrated. They are referred to as the *seme* and *uke* in Japanese, the words borrowed from martial arts terms meaning ‘attacker’ and ‘receiver’ respectively. The dichotomy is often obvious through the appearance of the characters or their behaviour patterns. If physical appearance is to be the deciding factor, it is naturally the case for the dominant partner in the relationship, the *seme*, to be the more masculine: broader of shoulders and larger of frame, while the submissive partner or the *uke* is slender and feminine. But it must be remembered that this is not always the case. *Yaoi* author Minami Haruka, whose works are famously explicit, draws her *ukes* with a near-child-like appearance, bringing disturbing paedophilic associations to the uninitiated mind, though regular readers of her work consider some of her works to be among the hallmarks of the hard *yaoi* genre. Sometimes the characters

look similar enough in appearance but are distinguishable through speech patterns; since Japanese possesses pronouns with varying degrees of masculinity, the *seme* is characterised by rougher speech while the *uke* often uses soft, almost feminine speech. In Itsuki Kaname's manga *Mede Shireru Yoru no Junjou* (The Love of a Quiet Evening) the protagonists Kichou and Kagerou are both high level courtesans in a place that appears to be Kyoto's Gion Geisha district but brought into the present time. Being prostitutes meant for the pleasure of other men, both Kichou and Kagerou are extremely effeminate in appearance, long haired and elegant featured. When love grows between them it is Kichou who is the dominant partner, taking the lead in initiating all their dalliances. Despite being a courtesan, his speech is rougher than Kagerou's feminine high courtly speech, and it is in this that Kichou gives away his *seme* status.

Often, the *seme* and *uke* are differentiated on character types. Both partners are equally attractive men and there are no obvious visual clues as to their respective sexual roles. However, there exists, in BL conventions, a distinct set of character types into which most *semes* and *ukes* fall, and each *seme* character type is generally matched to a particular *uke* type. Each type displays certain characteristics that would appeal to a different demographic of readership, similar to the concept of *moe*. The popular *seme* and *uke* types as characterised by 2chan, the popular Japanese culture message board are:

- *Kakkoi buaiso* (Cool, aloof) *seme*: This is one of the most common *seme* types: good-looking, stylish, aloof, doesn't talk much. He is paired with the equally common *Tennen genki* (naturally energetic) *uke*: cheerful, straightforward and upbeat.
- *Hetare* (incompetent or loser) *seme*: Wimpy, meek or undemanding, he may not have the nerve to make the first move, and once things get underway he's probably under the *uke*'s control. Often also *wanko* (puppy) *seme*, which implies that he will devotedly fawn on his *uke* like a puppy and doggedly pursue the *uke* until he gets him, despite constant rejection. The *hetare wanko semes* are usually paired with one of the more aggressive *uke* types, such as the *Sasoi* (seductive) *uke*, who puts the moves on his *seme*, or the rare *Osoi* (rapist) *uke*.
- *Kichiku* (brutal or demonic) *seme*: Cold, cruel, or sadistic, loves to torment his *uke* mentally and/or physically. *Kichiku Megane* indicates the same plus glasses, which is a fetish all by itself but in this case also symbolizes power and status.

*Uke* types that vary in being paired with different varieties of *seme*s include:

- *Ojou* (queen) *uke*: Beautiful, elegant, and strong-willed. May be arrogant, demanding, or expect to be treated like royalty. This type of *uke* is likely to be from a wealthy and/or traditional family.
- *Heibon* (ordinary) *uke*: The “Everyman”. He has no distinguishing features, but a hot *seme* will fall in love with him anyway, quite like a traditional romance novel heroine.

The power dynamics in BL cannot be based on gender differences as there is no significant male-female equation present in the texts. In the place of this traditional power structure, it is clear that the *seme-uke* dichotomy has its own nuances, and these bear examining; if BL is considered representations of ideal romance because the relationships therein are founded on equality, then how does this equality come about when there is always a distinct dominant and submissive partner? And how far does sexual dominance or submission reflect the actual power dynamic?

BL texts do not represent realistic relationships, but play with the erotic potential generated by differences in status or power. As such, the stories can be said to be about sex which derives its interest from imagining power differentials, not equality. The same-sex nature of the relationships in the manga gives the female authors a chance to play with the erotics of power by other means, or explore alternate meanings of the erotic itself.

It is clear from the different types of *seme-uke* pairs that there is never a consistent dominance of the *seme* over the *uke* except in terms of sexual positions – the *hetare seme* for instance is always secondary to whichever *uke* he is paired with. The fact that there is a ‘rapist *uke*’ also serves to highlight the fact that the *uke* is never disempowered in a BL relationship. In many school romances, for instance, the ordinary power difference between student and teacher is subverted in having a student play the aggressor to the *uke* teacher. Similarly in office stories, a popular plot device to reverse the superior-subordinate positions. When the story is about apparent equals, the power differentials come from differences in wealth, popularity, or intelligence. Emotional weakness is also common in *ukes* who would in other ways be ‘superior’ to the *seme*s. For instance, in *Junjou Romantica*’s pair of Kamijou Hiroki

and Kusama Nowaki, the former is an assistant professor in a prestigious university and the latter an orphan medical student. Kamijou is by description the ‘man’ in the relationship who earns money and who is older as well. However, his character is constructed in a way that makes him financially and socially sound but emotionally vulnerable, broken from an unrequited love and by virtue of that vulnerability, he becomes the *uke* of the pair. In *A Love Song for the Miserable* by Yukimura, another aspect of the power dynamics between *seme* and *uke* is revealed. Manga texts are always careful to show that the sexual submission of the *uke* does not mean he is weak in other aspects. When one of the characters, an office worker or ‘salaryman’ named Asada (the *uke*), feels that his lover Sunao, a successful chef, is offering him pity when his job is on the line, he reacts by pushing him away, pride hurt:

“Somebody like me, who nobody has any hopes for, and someone successful like you. How can you think we’re similar?! I feel more and more miserable about myself the longer I’m with you!” (149)

The emotional climax of many *yaoi* manga comes when the *uke* finally takes initiative in asserting his own desire. It does not change the dynamic between them, merely that the desired, the *uke*, finally crosses into desiring the *seme*, signalling reciprocity and equality in the relationship. Show of power in BL is closely linked with the narration of sex. The *seme* is the dominating partner in bed but there is always a sense of unspoken equality between the two partners. The *uke* may be considered the ‘lesser’ partner due to his sexual submissiveness but the narrative does not disempower him because of it. Instead, it is the *uke*’s pleasure that is focussed on in sex scenes, his expressions of ecstasy and the *seme*’s delight in bringing him to such a point. The panels in the comics also convey this focus, with the penetrating partner rarely coming into focus as all the images are of the *uke* in varying states of pleasure. Similar to the rape-for-love narratives in which the victim’s pleasure is given paramount importance, it is implied that the *seme*’s own pleasure depends on the *uke*’s orgasm. This is a facet of the equality that BL seeks to generate because heterosexual pornography generally focuses on the erotic fulfilment of the ‘male’, penetrating partner. In heterosexual narratives and the general societal view, being penetrated is considered disempowering and emasculating. However BL validates the beauty and pleasure of being penetrated through focus on the *uke* during sex scenes, thereby *empowering* him rather than the converse. In Nagato Saichi’s *Kou’un no Rihatsushi* (Lucky Barber), as seen in Fig. 2.1, the sex scene has a full-frame shot of the *uke*, Nachi, and only a

fragment of the *seme*, Tsukasa, whose gaze is fixed on Nachi. It is implied throughout the encounter that Tsukasa's desire is to bring Nachi pleasure before taking his own.



Fig. 2.1 Even visually, it is the uke's pleasure that is paramount as is visible in this scene from *Kou'un no Rihatsushi*.

(Nagato, Saichi. *Kou'un no Rihatsushi* vol. 1, Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten. 2007.)

***“He is very handsome. [...] It’s weird. It is just different. It’s not... men. It’s just him.”***

- Ianto Jones to his sister regarding Jack Harkness, *Torchwood: Children of Earth*

It is significant to note that though the characters in most BL manga, in accordance to the *bishounen* aesthetic, appear androgynous and sometimes more feminine than masculine, this does not define their sexual orientation. Boys’ Love is rarely about ultra-feminine gay men. In fact, often the characters in BL do not identify as gay at all. In Takanaga Hinako’s *The Tyrant Falls in Love*, Souichi is a bad-tempered, violent researcher whose colleague Morinaga has been in love with him for years. Souichi is a self proclaimed homophobe, but through the course of his journey in the manga series, one sees his growing attachment to Morinaga, one that he is in constant denial of. The relationship between Souichi and Morinaga is more problematic with regard to the fact that it began with an act of what can only be termed as rape and their coupling often holds elements of non-consensual sex, but this will be examined in detail later on. The fact remains that Souichi, who would ordinarily be struggling with his own paradoxical homophobia – a result of being sexually assaulted by a professor – rather starts to get attached to Morinaga despite his best efforts to deny it.

In many BL manga, the protagonists reject categorisation and settle for the (infamous) “I’m not gay but I love you,” line or one of its many variations, which implies a kind of ‘single target sexuality’. This is to say that often a character will declare that he is not gay, that he is not sexually attracted to any men except the one he is in love with. He does not define himself as a homosexual, therefore, or a member of the gay community, because his sexuality is limited to one person who just happens to be of the same sex. Often, only one of the protagonists is openly gay and the other somehow manages to get caught up in the whirlwind of his sexuality.

The question that this leads to is naturally a question of why create characters that exhibit homo or bi-sexuality and not require any degree of identification with regard to the sexuality? It could be that the authors do not want their characters to prescribe to the ‘idea’ of being gay or the image that it stereotypically represents. It is also possible that the artists feel that there is simply no need for the protagonists to declare their sexuality outright. As Donald Hall states in his “Brief, Slanted History of ‘Homosexual’ Activity”, to declare oneself as gay is only possible in a world where “sexuality is perceived as having an identity determining capacity” (23), a world



which works on heteronormative values and “I am straight” is the generally approved social norm. It is also to be noted that in Japan, the gay community remains largely ‘unlabelled’, resisting gay identification because of an unwillingness to have their identity determined by their sexual acts.

So what kind of world do BL authors create for their characters? It is implied that the attraction of the protagonists of many BL manga towards the same sex is limited to one person and one person alone, which is not very different from the very traditional romantic trope of possessing ‘one true love’. What the manga therefore do is build a world in which ideal romance is possible between two individuals who fall absolutely in love with each other; a world, therefore, in which there is no particular distinction based on the sex of the person one falls in love with, or a world where homosexuality is as equally acceptable as heterosexuality. The story of *Junjou Romantica* begins with Takahashi Misaki, a young man in his final year of high school who approaches his elder brother’s best friend Usami Akihiko to tutor him before he takes the university entrance examinations. After a series of events and sexual encounters with questionable consent, Misaki and Akihiko enter a relationship. There are two other couples in the series, the second being Akihiko’s childhood friend Hiroki who was originally in love with him but later falls for Nowaki, a man he meets while nursing a broken heart. The third couple involves Miyagi Yoh, Hiroki’s colleague from the university where he teaches, who is rather determinedly pursued by a boy fourteen years younger than him who happens to be the brother of his ex-wife. Merely perusing the nature of the couples is sufficient to understand that in the *Junjou Romantica* world, homosexuality is more of a norm than a deviation from it. Female presence is minimal in the manga, with the only women being relegated to side roles that bear no importance to the plot. There is rarely more than a word spared for the fact of the characters’ ‘gayness’, not even for the thus far heterosexual Miyagi, whose only protest against Shinobu’s attention is the fact that he is much younger than him. In one of the episodes in the manga, Misaki is afraid of facing the displeasure of Usami’s family for his relationship with the novelist. This is, however, not because of the fact that they are both men. It is on the fact of Misaki’s emotional suitability to Usami. Sexuality is never an issue worth talking about in BL manga; being attracted to and loving another man does not make an individual gay, it rather heightens the truth of their love.

Another example of the ‘gaytopia’ taken to the extreme is Higuri You’s *Gakuen Heaven*, a manga set in the all-male space of a boarding school for boys. The blurb on the manga cover describes it thus:

Keita Itou received a mysterious letter inviting him to attend the elite BL Academy, a prestigious school attended by the brightest young men in the nation. On the way to his first day, his bus encounters a freak accident that throws him in the middle of the two most popular guys in school. In a sea of amazing young men, Keita struggles to find out what makes him unique, and how he can possibly deserve to be treated as an equal by the boys of BL, especially the handsome student council president that he has his eye on. (Higuri, Vol.1)

What it does not mention is what the readers are already expected to know, that the story can only progress in only one way from that point onwards. Higuri’s purpose is in fact to create a world that takes the general BL trope of an ideal *bishounen* paradise in which everyone is ‘gay’ to a parodic extreme. The protagonist, Keita, spends his first few days at his new school (Bell Liberty Academy, named so that it can be abbreviated to BL Academy as a bonus inside joke to its readers) meeting several of the most eligible bachelors among the students and in the process making a number of them fall in love with him for no apparent reason. But it is to be noted that no one at Bell Liberty Academy actually claims to be gay, they are all simply attracted to Keita who happens to be a boy.

Besides the parodic purpose, there is a possibility that the reason why so many BL stories are set in ideal worlds is so that the world itself does not interfere with the core of the narrative, and at the core, all BL narratives are love stories that are meant to fulfil not just the perverted desires of their readers but also their desire for the aforementioned ‘pure and beautiful’ romance. For this reason, many manga contain declarations of undying true love, a love that is capable of conquering anything that comes in its way. For instance, Takashima Kaoru’s *Wild Rock* contains the equivalent of a marriage between the two characters, in which they pledge themselves to each other: “My body belongs to the earth, but my soul belongs to you alone.” (105) Romantic declarations of undying love are quite common in BL, with similar echoes being found in a number of stories.

It is the fact that so many BL manga are set in these ideal worlds that has caused the gay community to raise a charge against it for turning homosexuality into a

fantastic spectacle and presenting an unrealistic world view. The *yaoi ronso* (*yaoi* debate) of 1992 picked up on this very aspect of BL when gay activist and drag queen Sato Masaki went on a tirade against women who read and wrote *yaoi*. He accused them of harming the basic human rights of gay men by presenting skewed images of them as perfect and beautiful individuals, thereby constructing a flawed picture of them to their readers in particular and society as a whole in general. Sato believed that *yaoi*, in creating unattainable ideals of (homosexual) manhood, served to further the divide between gay men and mainstream society. He also accused the women who read and wrote *yaoi* to be innately perverted, a claim that will be dealt with in greater detail later on. However, most of Sato's arguments were quickly dismissed because the authors were willing to accept the fact of their perversion, and further because of their claim that they never professed to be creating texts that accurately reflected society. BL is, through and through, the product of the fantasy of women who choose to shift the focus from themselves to men as the objects of desire.

Given Sato's charge on the lack of *realism* in the *yaoi* or Boys' Love genre, it is worth examining what this realism entails. There are multiple ways of looking at this, the first being the application of Western models of gay identity formation onto the world of BL. As the examination of homosexuality in Japan reveals, gayness means a different thing in Japanese society than it does in the West. Therefore, if realism in BL is defined by having characters that face a degree of societal persecution for their sexual identity or storylines that involve a form of 'coming out' as gay by one (or more) of the characters, it is mostly Western models that are being followed. There are few BL manga that involve actual coming out narratives that involve the character being socially rebuked for his orientation. Instead, manga that deal with characters coming out generally arc into concepts of acceptance of one's own sexuality and the integration of the character into mainstream society. The works of Yoshinaga Fumi have been hailed for their adherence to realism for this reason. Many of her characters are openly gay men who acknowledge their sexual identity. In *Seiyō Kotto Yougashiten* (known more popularly by its English title *Antique Bakery*), she introduces the character of Ono, a gay patisserie chef who has a history of making men fall in love with him regardless of their sexuality. The manga begins with high-school aged Ono confessing to a classmate Tachibana, who will later grow up to be the protagonist of the story.

Ono: Tachibana, I love you. I'm sorry, I know you're really popular with the girls and you're totally normal so saying this sort of thing can only make you feel uncomfortable, but I thought I could at least tell you my feelings before graduation... I think we probably won't see each other after this and you won't have to hear this sort of disgusting thing again. (turns to leave) Goodbye, that's all I wanted to say.

Tachibana: Wait, Ono... Are you really content with just confessing your love to me?

Ono: (pauses, looking shocked) ...

Tachibana: Truthfully, you really want to make out with me, right? When you jerk off, you close your eyes and think of me, right?

Ono: (shocked and embarrassed) *How... I... I...*

Tachibana: What does it matter? We're both guys, you don't have to hide it from me.

Ono: Uh... Tachibana... You don't feel disgusted?

Tachibana: (smiling pleasantly) Disgusted? Of course I do! (scowls) I'm so disgusted I'm about to throw up! Go to hell, you homo!

(Vol. 1, Chapter 1, page 9)

When the two cross paths again as potential employer and employee fifteen years later, Tachibana is mortified at how he treated Ono in the past, but Ono claims that it was Tachibana's rejection of him that gave him his "gay of demonic charm" powers that allow him to seduce any man. Unlike other manga that toy with homophobia, like *The Tyrant Falls in Love*, *Antique* does not follow the accepted line of having Tachibana 'grow into gayness' in order to reciprocate Ono's lingering feelings for him. Acceptance is an oft repeated trope in Yoshinaga's manga, and *Antique Bakery* is in many ways the story of Ono allowing himself to be seen not just as a promiscuous gay man as he was in the start of the story but more than that, a part of the family that grows around Tachibana's cake shop. In another of Yoshinaga's manga, *First Period is Lively Civil Law* is the law student Tamiya who is in denial of his sexuality. In the course of the story and through his interaction with his flamboyantly gay and highly flirtatious classmate Todou, Tamiya begins to accept the fact that the reason he has never been interested in women is his homosexuality, though it is clearly a difficult decision for him to come to. Tamiya and Todou's first sexual encounter is significantly silent, with no words being exchanged between the characters, as seen in Fig 2.2 and 2.3 Yoshinaga leaves the interpretation of the characters' expressions to the readers, who can read into the almost cinematic shots in the frames the Tamiya's silent attempt to come to terms with his homosexual identity. This is where Yoshinaga's play with 'realism' shows; her characters echo real concerns of the gay community whether in the form of 'coming out' narratives or by referring to the desire to be part of the mainstream while at the same time not willing to be subsumed by it.



Fig. 2.2, 2.3 The scene when Tamiya and Todou finally give into their feelings is devoid of dialogue, using silent frames and letting the characters do the talking.

(Yoshinaga, Fumi. *First Class is Civil Law*. Carson: DMP. 2005)

**Shuichi:** *Anyone would cry after what you did! You're a rapist, you big jerk!*

**Yuki:** *Admit it, you liked it! You masochist punk!*

**Shuichi:** *I - I couldn't help it! It felt... well... nice. (blushes)*

- Murakami Maki, *Gravitation*

In many BL manga, particularly those belonging to the *yaoi* sub-genre, rape as a cliché plays a role in the progression of the narrative. This can take several forms, some of which parallel a trope in many classic heterosexual romance narratives: the threatened rape of one of the protagonists that allows his lover to save him from being 'defiled', and following this, set them on the road to fulfilling their romance. The second is rape of *uke* by the *seme*, which involves one of the partners being forced into sexual submission by the other. There are many layers to both these tropes. However, most of them defy ordinary rape narratives because BL as a genre itself is founded on the idea of subversion of expected norms.

In the case of 'rescue' narratives, a common trope is for the captors to ply the victim, usually an *uke*, with an aphrodisiac of some sort, heightening his sexual

arousal and making him more 'willing'. However, it is rare that the rapist succeeds in proceeding beyond initial foreplay in such stories, due to the timely arrival of the rescuer, usually the *seme* of the story. The two characters then proceed to have sex with each other until the effect of the aphrodisiac wears off, ostensibly to put the *uke* out of his uncomfortable arousal and also to cleanse him of the scars of the experience. In the second variety of rape narratives in BL, the story generally goes that the *seme*, overcome with feelings of love/lust and uncontrollable attraction towards the *uke*, forces himself upon him. This could be predicated by one or the other character's use of alcohol or drugs that leads him to this temporary lapse in judgement. The advance is met with resistance and the sexual act may or may not necessarily be brought to climax during the encounter. The aftermath is that the *uke* is irate (and mildly traumatised) by the incident, and often the *seme* is required to reach out to the *uke* emotionally and not just physically before they can fulfil their romantic roles. In time both partners start to take pleasure in the act, and the seeds of romance blossom into fruition. Nakamura Shungiku uses the non-con trope often in her work. In *Junjou Romantica*, the protagonist Misaki is flung into Akihiko's bed and groped quite against his will within pages of meeting the novelist for the first time. In *The Tyrant Falls in Love*, the 'relationship' begins when Morinaga takes advantage of and rapes an inebriated Souichi. The rest of the manga series explores the development of this relationship, with Souichi being forced to have sex with his colleague largely against his will at first, though it is clear that he is slowly growing to realise that he has real feelings for Morinaga and violently protests this development. To readers it is in this image of the 'protesting *uke*' that the appeal of *Tyrant* lies. As one review for the manga states, "We don't want to see Souichi get raped but we guiltily don't want to see him stop protesting either."

Such narratives in which there is a clear intention to pair the two characters together romantically through the course of the manga generally take care to ensure that even though the *uke* is being forced to have sex against his will, he is physically enjoying it far more than he should, indicating a deep rooted attraction for the *seme* that he just needs to find it in himself to accept. It is highlighted with the obvious visual images and with the *seme* accompanying his actions with comments on the *uke*'s trembling sensitivity to being touched, on the erectness of his nipples and penis, and so on. The commentary is met with blushing verbal protest but the readers

familiar with the 'rules' of BL narrative progression are aware that the body's consent signifies the *uke*'s own willingness to participate in the act, a fact that is cemented when the two inevitably fall in love.

The next set of figures are the first 'rape' scenes from *Junjou Romantica* (Figure 2.4 and 2.5) and *The Tyrant Falls in Love* (Figure 2.6 and 2.7) respectively. In the *Romantica* pages, Misaki's discomfort in feeling good from Akihiko's ministrations is clear, but out of a sense of pride in his own masculinity he refuses to yell to call the whole encounter off: "No! I can't yell! Then I lose!" He further goes on to admit to himself that he does, in fact, feel aroused by the other man's touch: "This pervert's hands – A man's ... Feels good." This can be read to mean, therefore, that he already harbours a degree of affection for and attraction towards Akihiko.

Similar is the case in Figures 2.6 and 2.7 where Souichi denies feeling any pleasure at Morinaga's actions and rejects any desire to feel any pleasure. Morinaga however, regardless of the fact that his actions can be read as rape and he is taking advantage of the other man, is determined to put Souichi's pleasure first and foremost, taking care to relax him first. There is no element of the violence normally associated with rape, it is non-consensual sex as an act of love.

Two questions can be drawn from these observations: Why do rape fantasies figure so strongly into the storylines of popular BL manga? And by featuring so often and with such 'lovable' rapists who only have the pleasure of the other partner in their minds, do the manga run the risk of 'normalising' rape? Especially when rape usually ends up as the starting point for a love relationship?

Since most BL manga do not hold any claim to be portraying real life situations or characters, the taboos that apply to our society do not necessarily apply to the BL worlds – S&M, incest and bondage are all common occurrences in stories. That said, the rape fantasies remain exactly as they are, fantasies. BL by its very nature exists to fulfil the desires of its writers and readers, and it is partly appealing due to the 'forbidden' nature of its narratives of love between men. In this view, non-consensual sex becomes nothing but yet another of the 'kinks' that the writers and readers of *yaoi* stories confess to enjoy by creating and consuming the texts.



Figure 2.4, 2.5. Akihiko has his way with Misaki within pages of first making his acquaintance.

(Nakamura, Shungiku. *Junjou Romantica* Vol.1 Los Angeles: Blu. 2005)



Fig. 2.6, 2.7. Morinaga rapes Souichi after the latter accidentally plies himself with an aphrodisiac.

(Takanaga, Hinako. *The Tyrant Falls in Love*. Gardena: Juné (DMP). 2010)



There is a sense of camaraderie between the authors and the readers in sharing the same 'dirty secret', and the combination of the forbiddenness of non-consensual sex and the fact that it is between two men who love each other make it that much more alluring to the audience. Some see rape as the creator of tension between the two characters and in the narrative itself. Any romance narrative relies on a certain level of tension, mostly sexual but often social, economic or political. The dramatic tension has the very specific purpose of highlighting the narrative; it is used to smoothly organise the story in which two men/boys realise they are meant to be together. The violence and emotional friction between the characters is part of the sexual and emotional appeal of the story.

Rape in *yaoi*, when not meant to serve a purpose in victimising the *uke* so that the *seme* can provide him comfort, seeks to be seen and interpreted as an expression of love. It isn't depicted as an act of criminal violence, and the *seme*'s actions are never taken to be the result of his violent disruptive tendencies, but rather his uncontrollable love for the *uke*. It is, as Suzuki Kazuko theorises, meant to express an affirmation of one's commitment to one's partner, which is exemplified by lines such as "I can't control myself around you." Due to the fact that stories don't extend beyond a few chapters in the case of most *yaoi* manga, sex becomes the means through which emotional attachment is expressed. The violence in the sex becomes a "measure of passion" (257). Through *yaoi*, therefore, the authors express a certain longing that resonates with the readers, a longing for unconditional love that will be offered them even at the risk of violating social convention. Rape as an act of love resists the idea of being physically and mentally stained by the experience, removing to a great degree the victimisation of the one being forced into the act of lovemaking. Suzuki also adds that the social stigmatisation of the victim is resisted in these manga by portraying, "male protagonists, loved by the very partners who rape them... imbued with innocence" (258)

To answer whether *yaoi* 'normalises' rape, we need to define what is meant by *normalising* in the first place. If it means that readers of *yaoi* that involve non-con sex acts deem the same acts to be equally permissible in the world outside of the manga, then the evidence would state the contrary. Readers of BL are quite aware of the fantastic nature of manga and how the stories are the fulfilment of their kinks. Mostly they equate the occurrence of rape in *yaoi* to the once popular 'bodice ripper'

romances in terms of content and the thrill the audience gets. This can further be substantiated by the claims of readers of *yaoi* commenting on blog posts discussing rape in the genre, most of whom hold by the argument that there is rarely any element of reality in the rape narratives, there is no sense of trauma or pain and it has become such a common and accepted trope that there is little space to relate it to rape in the real world at all.

I don't think BL manga normalizes rape in any sense. Rape in real life is about power, domination, and anger ... rape in BL manga is almost always presented as the "rapist" literally can't contain his feelings for the "victim" (who also is usually presented— eventually, if not within the same scene – as wanting it anyway). It's basically a device to show overwhelming feelings.

I'm sure there are a few BL readers— stateside and in Japan – who might process the rape as "normal" but I suspect that those readers would be ones who have difficulty processing social norms in general."

... because as a *yaoi* reader fantasy rape is a totally different matter for me than anything associated with the real thing...<sup>1</sup>

There are two reasons why the sexual violence in *yaoi* is not condemned as much as it would be in other genres of manga or in mainstream western literature. The fact that *yaoi* is meant for a female readership is closely linked to this. Again, paralleling 'bodice rippers' of the 70s that were enjoyed primarily by women, the BL reading audience would also take them as an opportunity to 'enjoy' the rape fantasy as a kink without there being any scope for confusion between the fantasy act and the brutal real-life version. It also offers a "guilt-free experience to the readers with the emotional distancing that manga as drawings allow." There also remains the fact that many of the readers of BL and *yaoi* have grown up with a healthy sexual diet of manga and anime and rape is a very common trope in Japanese *hentai*<sup>2</sup> manga and anime, and it stands to reason that it would be favourably imported into the Boys' Love genre as well. It also explains why such narratives are easily accepted without any of the initial discomfort with the premise that western readers, not familiar with the tropes of the genre, would face. The Japanese audience has already learned that *yaoi* stories, like *hentai* narratives, are strictly in the realm of fantasy and there is no room for the two to cross over.

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<sup>1</sup> Responses to a post entitled "A dangerous question: Yaoi normalises rape? [sic]", July 26 2008. <http://comicsworthreading.com/2008/07/26/a-dangerous-question-yaoi-normalizes-rape/>

<sup>2</sup> Hentai is a genre of Japanese anime and manga that is purely and explicitly pornographic in nature.

## “Girls in Yaoi = Bad Idea”

- Half Hero, commenter on the Gaia online forums<sup>3</sup>

BL manga is also characterised by the distinct lack of women in the narratives themselves. Sagawa Toshiko believes that women are more comfortable imagining and depicting strong, ideal and free characters if they are male due to societal restrictions. The *bishounen* in the narratives are then projections of the female audience’s own femininity as they can only identify with truly autonomous figures in male form. McLelland argues that “women protagonists are redundant because female subjectivity is already embodied in the ‘male’ characters”<sup>4</sup> referring to the *uke*, who is at the same time both object, in relation to the *seme*, and subject by virtue of his maleness. However, Akatsuka argues that this is only part of the picture.

(...) females are also marginalised because of their physical body and interaction with the male protagonists rearticulates too blatantly the problem of sex as gender and masculinity as privileged over femininity. That is, it reasserts the very heteronormative equation that the *uke* is meant to subvert. (169)

Women in BL are pushed to the background, Akatsuka says, to assert the masculinity of the *uke* through differentiation. Alternatively, they are used to highlight the fact that the *uke* is, despite any feminine characteristics he may display, a man. The character of Hiiragi from Sakuragi Yaya’s *Stay with Me* can be examined in this respect. The *uke* in this story is Shibata, who, despite being awkwardly tall (defying convention by being taller than his *seme*) is defined in rather feminine terms; he desires to be the princess to his boyfriend’s prince, he enjoys cooking for and feeding the said boyfriend and so on. Hiiragi is a woman but drawn using the *bishounen* aesthetic to the point that she could easily pass for a man, and claims that she wants to “protect” Shibata. She is therefore the converse of the *uke*, the masculine woman. The manga risks the effeminisation and disempowerment of Shibata through this portrayal of a woman stronger than him, but in order to ‘even the score’, the narrative puts them in a potentially dangerous situation that requires the other protagonist of the story, Issei (the *seme*), to rescue them. Hiiragi at this point gives in to her feminine ‘weakness’ and Shibata’s masculinity is, in contrast, brought in to focus. Even the narrative (Fig. 2.8) points it out when Issei reminds her of her femininity.

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<sup>3</sup> “Female Characters in Yaoi?” 24<sup>th</sup> October, 2010. <http://www.gaiaonline.com/guilds/viewtopic.php?t=18061661&page=3>

<sup>4</sup> McLelland, Mark. “The Love between ‘Beautiful Boys’ in Japanese Women’s Comics,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 9, no.1 (2000), 2



Fig. 2.8 Hiiragi is 'put in her place' as a woman in a yaoi manga. The scene is meant to highlight the fact that, despite possessing feminine characteristics, Shibata is a boy.

(Sakuragi, Yaya. *Stay with Me* Vol. 1 Gardena: Juné (DMP). 2010. Print.)

MM Blaire, in research on readers of BL, identifies two further reasons why female characters are excluded from the narratives: firstly the fact that the reader will, perhaps unconsciously, compare herself to the character in the narrative. This is not to say that the reader will find the female character a hindrance to her desire for one of the characters in BL the characters desire only each other, and the reader desires them both. Characters who threaten the relationship between them therefore stand in the way of the reader and her desire. Also, manga artists often portray women characters in flat, one-dimensional ways as compared to the protagonists, with them existing only to serve a purpose and possessing no real character beyond that. In other words, women characters are, unless they exist to support the main pair or help them on their way to true love, not *meant* to be liked. The second reason that Blaire draws is the appeal of a genre that depicts pornographic situations without the presence of a female body. Both the readers and the authors of BL manga desire to distance themselves from the female body which is the site of so many societal expectations. It is true, of course, that the lack of desire to engage with female sexuality can be considered an escapist or misogynistic action. However, in the ‘pure and beautiful’ world of male/male love, there is no room for such divisions, furthering the image of equality between partners that makes the genre so ideal as site of female fantasy.

From an examination of the various aspects of BL texts that have been carried out over the course of this chapter, certain conclusions can be drawn, and these fall in line with Suzuki Kazuko’s theorisations on the ideal world that these manga take their readers into, a world that displays three characteristics:

First, human relationships are unscathed by sexist norms prevailing in society. Second, protagonists retain their autonomy despite (or even because of) their involvement in apparent violence. And third, innocence and self-worth are affirmed by unconditional commitment to the other, and flaunted before the unapproving face of social convention. (258)

The desire to read and write BL texts can then, perhaps, be seen as driven by a desire by women to create an ideal society for *themselves* but within the knowledge that their own reality does not permit it. This falls in well with the *yaoi* storytellers’ mission for equality beyond gender divisions and suggests the desire of the women reading and writing the texts for relationships based on such equality. Andrea Wood theorises that the reason it is so widely received even in the conservative modern Japanese society is because the love between men is considered “pure” and “beautiful”.

Although Japanese society is no more tolerant of men or women expressing a gay or lesbian identity in real life than many western societies, as a fantasy trope for women male homosexuality is understood to be a beautiful and pure form of romance. Hence, it is possible in Japan for mainstream book-stores to carry many boy-love manga titles (among them classics such as *June* and *B-boy*) that depict stories about love between teenage boys often featuring illustrations of anal sex and fellatio, which can be purchased freely by anyone, including their intended audience of high school girls. (287-88, McLelland, 2000)

## CHAPTER THREE

### ROTTEN GIRLS

Boys' Love can be seen as a very 'participatory' genre of manga in that the tropes that are present in it are very strongly defined by the interest of the readers and fans, and it is expected of the readers to participate in turn in the production of further BL. This chapter will examine this relationship between reader and text, question whether the genre constitutes a form of pornography for women and how these women, the readers and writers of homoerotic manga, define their own identities. In order to obtain fan perspectives on many of these ideas, I will be using inferences drawn from comments posed on various issues by users in *yaoi* forums and blogs on the internet.

Having examined some of the common themes and facets of the genre, we are in a position to ask why it is that women read or write BL stories. What is it about the male/male narratives that interests them to the point of not only wanting to create more but also encourage each other to do so? Dru Pagliassotti in her essay "Better than Romance: Japanese BL Manga and the Subgenre of Male/Male Romance Fiction" theorises that readers "enjoy BL's graphic descriptions of sexual activities, androgynous protagonists, shifting points of view and multiple identifications, and egalitarian love relationships." Each of these reasons bears further examination through which a complete picture of the various reasons for the appeal of BL will become clear.

*Heated, sloppy kissing sounds, squeaking beds, moans and screams of pleasure ...  
Bring it on, boys!*

- VoOS, contributor to the aarinfantasy *yaoi* forums<sup>1</sup>

Pornography implies sexual arousal or excitement from exposure to explicit sexual descriptions or imagery. Women object to heterosexual porn for a variety of reasons, including the fact that women are objectified in the stories or videos and often the content of the narratives encourages sexual violence against women. Another reason is the fact that most porn is made with a *male* audience in mind and focuses on male

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<sup>1</sup> "Do you prefer yaoi over live action porn?" 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2008 <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t66925-do-you-prefer-yaoi.html>

pleasure. However, it would be erroneous to assume that a disinterest in or disgust for heterosexual pornography suggests that women are completely incapable of deriving enjoyment from pornography altogether, only that as Nigella Lawson wrote in the *Evening Standard*, “women require a different kind of pornography”. Erotica for women focuses on aesthetics as well as a degree of romance, although this does not mean that the sexual content is any way lessened. The act of mindless sex does not appeal to the female mind so porn that is directed at a female audience follows certain divergent aesthetics than that meant for men. This can include the removal of the “money shot” at the end of the act, and the focus on both sexual partners.

This defined, we can now move on to determining whether *yaoi* constitutes pornography for women. There are two ways of approaching this using Pagliasotti’s theorisations, based on the writings of Steven Marcus on Victorian pornography and those of Ann Snitow on romance novels. Marcus talks of Victorian ‘porntopias’ which are essentially backgrounds for what is referred to in fandom as *Porn Without Plot*: they are set in locations that are nowhere in particular, “no place” that, if named, is irrelevant; time is only important to indicate how long the sex act or series of sex acts last; characters are only defined as participants in sex and the only climax present is the sexual one. *Sex*, therefore, is all that is significant in narratives of this kind.

All men in it are always and infinitely potent: all women fecundate with lust and flow inexhaustibly with sap or juice or both. Everyone is always ready for anything, and everyone is infinitely generous with his substance. It is always summertime in pornotopia, and it is a summertime of the emotions as well – no one is ever jealous, possessive, or really angry. (Marcus, qtd in Pagliasotti 76)

There are BL stories that conform to this formula in which two men (or boys), classified easily into *seme* and *uke* on a very simple, surface level, have the most perfunctory of meetings in any given location – a school rooftop, in a hotel lobby, or any other insignificant setting, and proceed to have pages of sex for no apparent reason. But this is only one variety of *yaoi*. As we have seen in the earlier chapter, sex in BL tends to fulfil specific purposes in the texts, as a means of developing a relationship or to further the plot or to establish character dynamics. Protagonists are not necessarily in the mood for sex at all times, and chance encounters such as the one described often become the foundation of long-lasting relationships and require the characters to work through various challenges. Readers of BL admittedly enjoy it for



the sexual content, but the stories are equally important. Replies to a post on the BL fan forum aarinfantasy asking “Do you watch *yaoi* for the sexual excitement or the good storylines?”<sup>2</sup> represent the prevailing fan views on the matter:

“I like to see a *yaoi* [sic] with an interesting storyline and good sexual excitement.”

“I watch mostly for the sex XD. But I love when it's coupled with a good storyline so that the sex doesn't feel... just stuck in there just because.

I like for there to be SOME sort of build-up...”

“I want to find a *yaoi* SO hot, that not only will I be red in the face for days, (And my skin is dark, so it'll be a challenge, lol!) I'll walk around in a complete daze from it and everytime someone taps me to talk to me, I'll be super embarrassed as if they could see me thinking about said bishies, haha! And I like the non-rape scenes too! I'm a natural romantic, so to see two guys get it on out of love--though, it has to be raw and passionate--is definitely a fave of mine!”

The popular opinions are therefore that even good artwork is not enough in BL story, even if it is *yaoi*. Readers require there to be some form of a story to make the experience ‘worthwhile’. As a result, in most *yaoi* there is a privileging of romance and emotions over raw sex. It “wraps sex in the emotionalism of romance” as Snitow says. Her view on pornography is that there is a total sensory immersion in the experience and a desire for “complete, immediate gratification” If we are to accept a combination of both Snitow’s and Marcus’ views, then BL worlds are pornotopias where random, but intense, sexual encounters take place but they do not stand on their own, they are mostly supplemented with elements of story and character development to make them more appealing. There is little doubt as to the fact that BL falls into the category of pornography for women.

This brings me to a discussion of the question of identification in pornography. Do women who view porn necessarily identify with the female participant? If this is the case, then who do they identify with in pornography that involves no female participants? If BL texts are narratives of desire, describing what is sexually appealing to women, and when desire in this context is being expressed as narratives of sex between two men, then where does identification lie?

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<sup>2</sup> “Do you watch *yaoi* for the sexual excitement or the good storylines?” 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2010. <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t125027-do-you-watch-yaoi-pl.html>

We have already seen in the previous chapter how it is generally (and wrongly) assumed that women would automatically associate themselves with the *uke*, the penetrated partner in a BL relationship. Reader responses have supplemented this conjecture and have shown that opinions vary on whom the readers identify with in male/male storylines. An internet poll asking “Would you rather be the *seme* or the *uke* in a relationship?”<sup>3</sup> has shown that out of 1,150 participants, while 65% claimed identification with and a desire to be an *uke*, dominated by a “hot *seme*”, the remaining 35% preferred to play the *seme*’s role to a “feisty *uke*”. Without a female character to immediately identify with, readers can choose to share the experiences of the dominating or submissive partner, depending on their preference. The same way the emotional climax of a narrative, when the *uke* finally goes from being the desired to being the desirer, is a cathartic moment for the readers as well when the woman can identify with both the desired and the desiring, an opportunity not afforded to them in traditional narratives (Valenti). It is also interesting that most of the respondents to the poll, when asked, replied that the reason they chose to be *seme* was that it accorded them a degree of control that they were unwilling to relinquish. In her work on erotic manga, Shigematsu Setsu discusses identification in reading manga as:

Oscillating and fluid, shifting and incomplete, moving among multiple contradictory (psychic) sites that are constituted differently depending on the specific history and experiences of the subject. Some of these possible sites might be expressed as: I desire to be the object of desire/I hate the object of desire/I conquer the object of desire/the object of desire wants me/the object of desire hates me. (136)

The layout of BL manga facilitates the shifting of identification between *seme* and *uke* throughout the manga. There is no requirement from the reader to choose one or the other, and it is possible that the identification will change through the course of the narrative. Manga pages are often designed in a way that opposes a continuous flow of frames, dividing pages into multiple frames, strips and screens, so as to allow a multiplicity of opportunities for identification as the reader’s gaze shifts between the different points of view accorded: that of the *seme* and the *uke*, and also their own, as voyeurs, on the scenes. Shigematsu’s contention is that readers will identify with different perspectives to different degrees depending on their own personal history with gender hierarchy.

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<sup>3</sup> “Top or Bottom?” 27<sup>th</sup> November, 2009. <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f270/t118008-top-bottom-seme-uke-p1.html>

In the essay “A Child is Being Beaten”, Freud refers to a fantasy that he found often repeated in his psychoanalytic sessions, in which the subject, a girl, watches a child being beaten by his father. He draws three phases of fantasy that occur in the mind of the girl:

1. “A child is being beaten by the father” – the impulse of sexual desire is represented as sadistic, but the line between identification and dissociation is blurred.
2. “I am being beaten by the father” – the impulse of sexual desire is represented as masochistic, and the situation is subjectified.
3. “I am watching a child being beaten by the father” – the impulse of sexual desire is represented as scopophilic, and the situation is objectified.

Scopophilia is the Freudian idea of “pleasure in looking” in the sense of both seeing and being seen, consisting of active voyeurism and passive exhibitionism. Freud does not make note of the fact that almost all his female subjects envision the child they are watching in the scenario to be a boy, but as this is the case, it is possible to analyse BL within the framework of the third stage, where the viewer becomes a voyeur. The scenario manifests sexual desires arising from the female gaze directed towards the men who are interacting, the boy and his father. Taking into account how the third stage becomes a stimulus for masturbatory fantasy based on the position of the observer, it can be surmised that the core of *yaoi* fantasy therefore lies in the interaction of the ‘gaze’ and female sexual desire.

BL therefore foregrounds the female act of viewing a male homoerotic display, shifting the position of the woman from being the gazed upon object to the gazing subject while men become the object of the gaze. It is a representation of female desire from a scopophilic perspective, making the women the viewers and voyeurs and therefore the ones who derive pleasure from the act of viewing. While this is subversive in the act of making the women the *viewers* rather than the *viewed*, introducing the female gaze and giving women the power to make men the object of desire, it cannot be concluded that BL is an all pervasive solution to challenging the male gaze. This is because of the element of *guilt* that women experience when they take on this position of viewer.

Women have traditionally been separated from the realm of the erotic which was always a very phallo-centric space. They have, as a result, been constrained from watching Adult Videos or reading *hentai*, or erotic manga. There are also the psychological complexities associated with a sense of *guilt*. In “A Child is Being Beaten”, Freud defines the concept of female sexuality in terms of their inevitable feelings of guilt due to their unconscious (incestuous) desires. The guilt need not be uniformly due to incestuous desires, however. It can be theorised that women feel guilt and shame about identifying with female characters in pornography, who express pleasure and achieve sexual satisfaction by means of male penetration. To escape the guilt associated with the consumption of heterosexual pornographic material, women create the world of BL with its narratives of male homosexual eroticism “in which female readers needn’t consider the disadvantages of exposing their eroticism, since the mystified female sexual identity that fetters women in other forms of society is excluded from the male homosexual narratives of *yaoi*.” (Nagaike 84)

Through the medium of BL manga, women have been able to express their innate sexual desires and their ‘kinks’ in narratives that are suitably distanced from themselves through the absence of the female body. The appeal of BL does not stem from the sexual content alone, but more from the romantic, emotional content. The master narrative of most BL stories is always something along the lines of “you are the only love in my life”. There is a sense of monogamy between the characters in most stories, and the appeal of this is heightened with the ‘pure love’ underlying the relationships. Almost all stories in the genre are about the slowly developing love between a couple which results in several scenes of togetherness and bonding and culminates in explicit sexual illustrations of the fruition of their love. There are narratives that do not follow this exact scheme of development, but the fact remains that BL stories are essentially *pure* romances. This purity is closely connected to the fact that both the parties involved in the relationship are men, providing an equality that cannot be attained were there to be a woman in the equation – a theory that takes off from Eve Sedgwick’s concept of homosocial bonding. Homosocial bonding indicates how “philosophical thought has organised the representation of discourse according to the interests of male-dominated society, excluding women on the basis of identificatory sexual differences” (Nagaike, 96).

In BL, homosociality is idealised and eroticised by female readers who find it their point of entry into a magical world where they can attain the goal of a non-hierarchical sexual relationship. Gender altogether becomes a non-factor as a governing and determining force in love relationships. With the socio-cultural coding that most women grow up with and with the potential of childbearing playing such an important role in female identity, the only truly equal relationships could be the ones which negate the presence of women, a “sterile, homosexual relationship” (Suzuki, 261). The worlds of BL are those in which women can pursue the idea of ideal relationships beyond sex.

In BL, particularly *shounen-ai* manga, the male characters expose their ‘feminine’ side, which appeals to the readers who “like reading about men dealing with emotions and situations that women usually deal with”, interested as they are in the emotional interaction between men. (Pagliasotti, 72) There is no requirement in these manga of having to behave like men or women as far as traditional gender roles are concerned, they simply behave like “people”. BL also encourages the idea of soulmate love that exists beyond sex and gender. As to why this is possible only through the love between two men, Suzuki surmises that it is because the cultural dictum of female passivity “cannot be overcome with female-female bonding, though the heterosexual problem of male dominance can be avoided.” To quote slash theorists Lamb and Veith on the subject,

The myth of female passivity makes it difficult for the reader to imagine or accept two strong women are equally in love and who can be erotically active and mutually interactive, just as it makes it difficult to envision a truly equal heterosexual relationship.

It is only in a male/male relationship that women can escape what they have internalised with regard to the hierarchy of sexes in society that stands in the way of a truly equal love relationship. On the other hand, in BL manga, the androgynous appearances of both the partners and the emotional engagement and discourses expected by the readers further encourages this idea of pure love. As one Japanese woman said to lesbian author and activist Sarah Schulman, “Images of male homosexuality are the only picture we have of men loving someone else as an equal. It is the kind of love we want to have.” (Schulman, 245)

While it is easy to say that every woman seeks the idealised love relationships that BL fantasies offer them, not all of them turn to the genre as a means of expressing and fulfilling their desires. There is a very specific type of ‘fangirl’, therefore, for whom such subversive texts hold special appeal, who prefer the perfect symmetry of a love between two men over heterosexual romance, who see the world in a way that suggests that everyone is gay until proven otherwise. Who are these women who call themselves ‘*fujoshi*’?

*The dream spread among intoxicated minds even before the author knew it.  
My mind flies about lewdly... Please don't draw back, I don't care if we're losers  
We'll end up fangirling after all, even if we try to distance ourselves*

- Fujonet, the BL fangirl song

The term *fujoshi* was coined by Japanese BL fans to refer to themselves, a word taking off from a similar sounding word that means ‘respectable lady’. They swapped one of the characters for the one meaning ‘rotten’, changing the meaning to ‘rotten girl’. The corruption of the word ‘*fujoshi*’ in itself reflects how the women who read Boys’ Love consider themselves corruptors of texts, taking apart their heteronormative constructions and imbuing them with homoerotic content. This goes to show that an interest in BL, especially *yaoi*, is considered to be something that treads an ironic line between depravity and innocence.

Society accords women a degree of sexual innocence and ignorance. Patriarchal discourse situates women as unable to access active sexuality, and material related to it is not available to women. The world of sexuality is generally one that they are not allowed entry into as female sexual identities are not allowed to merge with the erotic. In Japanese society, this is visible even in the manga created for girls and boys: *shoujo* manga for girls contains ‘innocent’ artwork for the most part, with desexualised characters and androgynous beauty. Imagery is always symbolic, with flowers and scenery being used to signify emotionally (sexually) charged moments. *Shounen* manga, for boys, contains rampant sexuality with very physical imagery that is considered suitable for boys to consume. As Uli Meyer puts it in “Hidden in Straight Sight”, “everybody knows that boys are sexually active, but everybody still pretends that girls aren’t.” (232) In such a scenario, BL, like other forms of

homoerotica written by and for women, not only violates the notion of female sexual ignorance but also has male homosexuality at the centre. This is therefore twice transgressive: first in terms of the fact that women are writing about sex and second because they are writing about sex using the male body. Just like the word that describes them, the *fujoshi* are a mix of depravity and innocence from a societal point of view. By virtue of being women who are “assumed innocent”, they have the freedom to play with expectations and associations.

One of the most interesting features of the *fujoshi* community is that – the fact that it is a *community*. The women who read and write BL consider themselves as part of a secret clan of depraved young girls and women who ‘get their kicks’ from reading about two men ‘getting it on’. This goes back to the amateur origins of the genre, as parodic *doujinshi* of popular works sold at comic conventions. These *doujinshi* could only be created, and sold, if there were readers willing to support the pairing in the book. The bonds that the *fujoshi* share are due to their common ‘perversion’ and their tendency to ‘corrupt’ texts by imposing readings on them that may not have been the intention of the original author. Almost every *doujinshi* based on a *shounen* manga series, meant for young boys, imposes homosexuality on the main character and at least a handful supporting characters to make things interesting. This way of reading is referred to as the donning of ‘slash goggles’ in Western fandom and *yaoi-megane* (*yaoi* glasses) in the case of Japanese manga and anime, a way of looking at the world that enables women to see through eyes that see homosexual subtexts everywhere, not just in texts but also in real life. This is not to say that they begin to believe that everyone is gay, however, by merely drawing the participants into the realm of their desire, placing them there for their voyeuristic pleasure. It is natural therefore that a great many men protest to the *yaoi-megane* wearing gaze, fearing that it implies their disempowerment, feminisation or penetrability. The *yaoi-megane* is a means through which to do a perverse reading of a text, not very dissimilar to the queer agenda that proposes queer readings of texts. Mark Lipton in “Queer Readings of Popular Culture” describes this process as one in which they “decode texts against the mainstream, heterosexual grain. [...] Some directly sought to alter the intended meaning of a text [and] bend interpretation from a heteronormative meaning. These readers could find homosocial/sexual content in almost any text.” (168) By queering the texts thus, they also appropriate them.


The ability to view the world with *yaoi megane* is a characteristic that all *fujoshi* possess in abundance, as is the knowledge of their combined perversion. The fact remains that they can play with texts as well as with what society assumes to be traditional behaviour for women. Many theorists, including Matsui Midori and Sharon Kinsella, have theorised on why it is that women are so attracted to BL. Their explanations tend to be in the direction of being motivated by “lack” or the restrictions that society places on them, or “anxiety” for the same reasons. However, Marney Stanley in “101 Uses for Boys” accords most of the appeal of the genre to the fact that it’s *fun*. According to her, for outsiders, it is “difficult to see the playfulness and humour of many of these texts or to understand the role humour frequently plays in the author/reader relationship.” (Stanley, 99)

“*Yaoi*,” Stanley adds, “[is] transgressive precisely because they refuse to take themselves or the many narratives they subvert, seriously, and because they invite the readers to play along.” (99) The earliest *doujinshi* began as parody manga, queering otherwise ‘hard-straight’ characters, and it is in part that ability to play with characters and their sexualities, to create queertopias where women may exist only as complications or fangirls themselves – that certainly creates the appeal for the manga authors and their readers.

The relationship between the authors and readers is a very intimate one in that each author acknowledges herself as having been reader first and often encourages her own readers to take up the artist’s role and create their own BL stories. Not only that, BL authors are always quick to highlight the fact that they are no different from the women reading the books they have produced. Manga volumes often contain a short author bio on the inside flap of the front cover, usually consisting of inane, everyday information that highlight how the author is as ‘human’ as her readers, serving to introduce her to someone they might know in their everyday life rather than a larger than life figure that authors in other genres may be made out to be. In Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are two varieties of this kind of insert. In Takanaga Hinako’s bio in Figure 3.1, after the information on date of birth and blood type, very ordinary likes and dislikes, and the fact that she recently attained ownership of a “ferocious long-tailed cat” are given. Nakamura Shungiku’s introductory note is even more random, stating her name, age and blood type before describing the teddy bear pictured above her name and wondering if she spent too much money on it, a trait that should immediately



liken her to the hundreds of her readers who have ever felt the crunch of regretting an impulse buy. The BL author therefore never intends to develop any kind of an unreachable image for the readers to be awed by. Instead, “what is cultivated among the fans is the sense of membership to the *yaoi* community, which is the community of their fellow women fans” (Mizoguchi 154)

PROFILE	
	
<b>HINAKO TAKANAGA</b>	
<b>Birthdate</b>	September 16
<b>Blood Type</b>	O
<b>Location</b>	Nagoya City, Owari Region
<b>Likes</b>	Movies, subculture, callous doms.
<b>Dislikes</b>	Idleness.
<b>Recently</b>	Been living with a ferocious, long-tailed cat.



## 中村春菊

### PROFILE

●Shungiku NAKAMURA●

DOB: 12/13

BLOOD TYPE: O

The teddy of the photo above is the model for Rensa-san. His series number is 5929 and his price was 25000 yen. I don't know whether to be happy to own him or to be sad about spending all that money...

Fig. 3.1, 3.2 Takanaga Hinako's Profile (Challengers, Vol. 1, Houston: DramaQueen. 2004), and Nakamura Shungiku's Profile (Junjou Romantica Vol 1 Los Angeles: Blu. 2005)

The sense of community is also continued in the bonus pages that are found in most manga, a set of 'extras' at the end of the stories in which the author speaks directly to her readers. Often, in keeping with Japanese tradition, she asks for the continued patronage of her readers and thanks them for buying the volume they have completed reading. She thanks editors and assistants, friends and family and anyone else involved in her immediate life. Like the profiles that reveal the authors to be

ordinary ‘women next door’, the bonus pages also often describe mundane details of their lives. For instance, Machiko Madoka draws herself in the form of a super deformed seal (it is common among authors to describe themselves as crudely drawn caricatures of their real life appearances or as undefined animals) and comments on her recent sleeping habits.

My life’s really boring. I usually sleep face down in my pillow, it’s kind of gross so I want to change that habit. Lately I noticed that I can sleep on my back if I put a pillow on my stomach, but I’m not sure if this is a good idea either ... (I’m not just sleeping, I’m working hard on my manga!) (Machiko, *Tenki Yohou No Koibito*, Vol.2, 2006)

Also present in the bonus pages are descriptions of the author’s work process, how she conceived the story present in the volume and the characters therein. She also shares her own opinions on the characters, who her favourites were in the writing/drawing process, what her preferences are in terms of story and settings, and so on. Through the revelations on the bonus pages, therefore, the author and the readers are able to bond through similarities: the readers become aware that the author, like themselves, is first and foremost a *fujoshi*, a fangirl, expressing her fantasies and therefore encouraging her fellow fans to do so as well. While it is true that most narratives in some way are reflective of the creator’s tastes in storylines, characters, settings and the like, in BL stories, these are reflected not only in the representations in the narratives themselves but also being discovered by the authors during the course of creating the stories. Mamihara Ellie, in the postscript to *Geshuku Biyori*, confesses that, “My favourite kind of characters are relaxed, so I probably should have had my characters start out that way. I guess I’m better at creating dark personalities.” Other authors will talk about how their affection for a particular character type developed over the course of the creation of the manga. By describing how this interest grew through the development of the story, the author is once again developing a sense of community with the readers who might have gone through a similar process of discovery while reading the same story. Authors also direct readers on how to develop a more nuanced erotic imagination, encouraging them to develop their own fantasy worlds and ideal pairings to set in them. In the bonus pages of *Brother*, Ougi Yuzuha talks to her readers on setting the mood for fantasy:

In general to talk about how I like to see boy-on-boy kinky scenes depicted, I think it should present a “sexual mood” from beginning to end. Dim the genitals as much as possible, make the sex burst out of the frame, etc. A mood of having sex the whole time. Voices, sweat, facial expressions, everything.

In effect, the authors are ‘guiding’ the readers in the way of BL, and in the way of sexuality as a whole, inviting them to take their imaginations, and their sexuality, into their own hands. The dialogue between author and readers happens simultaneously with the reception of the BL narrative from the authors, and a relationship is developed between the two. The bonus pages, like the rest of the manga, become a space where the *fujoshi* can discuss the joys of exploring homoerotica and their mutual turn-ons, objectifying men in the form of the characters in the manga and offering them up as servings for consumption.

The *fujoshi* community is therefore formed of this continuum between author and reader, a continuum that is based not only on their interactions but also on the fundamental fact of their shared perversion. *Fujoshi* call non-fans ‘*ippanjin*’ or ‘general people’, considering them ‘normal’ in contrast to themselves. Mizoguchi Akiko uses the term ‘*yaoi* sexuality’ to describe the unique position of the *fujoshi* as women whose sexual fantasies involve two men, considering themselves to be part of a sexual minority of their own.

### **That’s Mighty Queer**

With its subversive content and questioning of gender expectations both within and outside texts, can Boys’ Love as a genre be considered queer? How does one define queerness? What does it entail? Can texts be defined as queer or is it a category meant for individuals or lifestyles? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Tendencies* defines it as,

The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically. (7)

Queerness, therefore, isn’t in what is defined, but rather in what remains undefined, unsignified. In attempting to establish the queerness of BL manga, it must be established first that the queerness of the genre isn’t because the manga contains

homoerotic content, but because it questions so many aspects of the heteronormative equation and problematizes the ideas of gender and sexual identity. This is again true for both within and outside the text: within with the *seme-uke* dichotomies that are flexible and defined on many different terms; outside with the fact that the *fujoshi* question the limits to which they can engage with sexuality and eroticism. Takemiya Keiko says that the notions of gender that the manga artists had before creating their texts would have crumbled away as they expressed their dual personality in the texts themselves, finding men to be the source and embodiment of their own sexual desires. In being given the freedom to identify with either the *seme* or the *uke*, the dominant or submissive partner, the “male” or “female” half of the relationship, penetrator or penetrated, they transgress the normal definitions of sexuality and gender. Uli Meyer continues the argument saying that,

... the transgression of sexuality and gender in BL can be quite literal, enabling its readers/creators to identify or feel with the male characters on a physical level... (2)

In BL manga, the idea of gender challenges and troubles the coherence and solidity of gender categories, ultimately rejecting “any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity.” (Wood, 397)

The popularity of the *bishounen* tradition in designing of characters in BL is also significant. In BL manga, there is a shifting of the gaze from female to male, as the object of desire on display is no longer the body of a woman but of a man. In the case of most manga, the body in question is the slender, elegant body of a *bishounen*, displayed for the pleasure of mostly female voyeurs. Most BL manga emphasise the ‘feminine’ qualities of the *bishounen*; the flawless, hairless skin, the expressive eyes and often extravagant outfits. Figure 3.3 features the characters from *Koisuru Boukun* in a bonus page from the manga. The eroticism in the image is none too subtle, from the exposed skin as Souichi (on the left) lifts the neck of his *yukata* and the water dripping down to his collarbone. It is clear that Souichi is meant to be the object of desire not only for Morinaga (on the right) but also to the women reading the book. As has already been established, the women reading the BL texts are given the choice and freedom of identifying with either one of the participants in the sex acts rather than the expected identification with the *uke*.

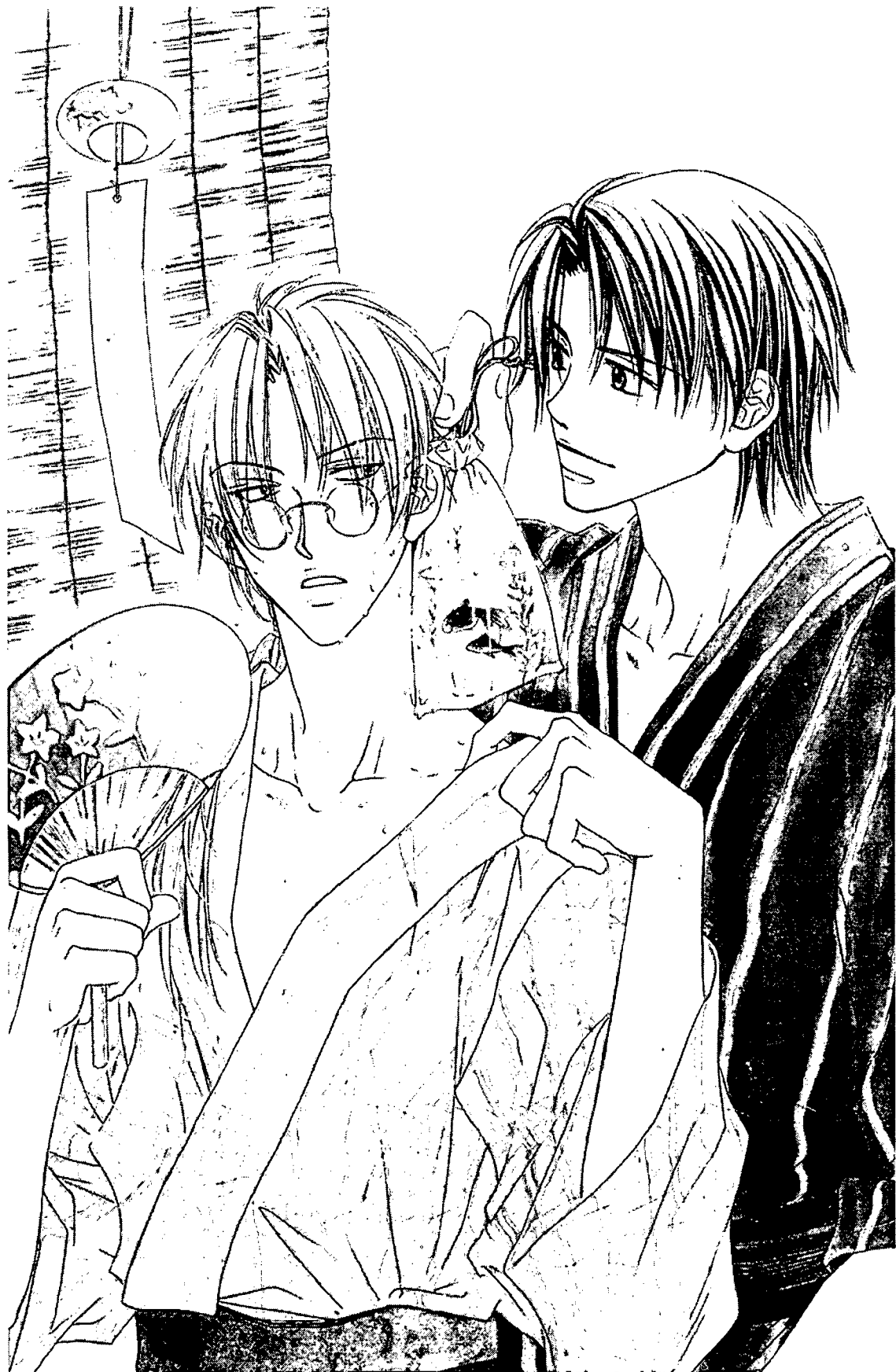


Fig. 3.3 A bonus insert from *The Tyrant Falls in Love* eroticises the *uke* (Soichi, left) and directs the audience's attention towards him.

(Takanaga, Hinako. *The Tyrant Falls in Love*, Vol. 2. Gardena: Juné (DMP). 2011)

Furthering the discussion on the gender fluidity that BL engages with in terms of male penetration, Uli Meyer says

*Yaoi* allows its female readers to experience themselves as penetrating *seme* and the male partner as penetrated *uke*. If part of the gender transgression and attraction of *yaoi* and more generally BL is related to active female sexuality, the other part has to do with passive male sexuality. (327)

It is no longer merely the content of the texts that becomes queer, but the readers and the writers of Boys' Love as well. This definition of 'queer' falls closer to the way Alexander Doty uses the term,

To question the cultural demarcations between the queer and the straight... by pointing out the queerness of and in straights and straight cultures, as well as that of individuals and groups who have been told they inhabit the boundaries between the binaries of gender and sexuality .... Queer would... describe the image of Katherine Hepburn dressed as a young man in *Sylvia Scarlett*, as it evokes a complex, often uncategorizable, erotic responses from spectators who claim all sorts of real-life sexual identities. (Doty 1993: xv-xvi)

By this, it could be theorised that all the women who both create and consume *yaoi* and *shounen-ai* are queer in that they find themselves both fascinated and sexually aroused by male homoeroticism. Not only that, but they also identify with one or the other partner in the often explicitly graphic sex acts. The reversal of sexual roles may not have any overarching agenda of female empowerment or the desire to dominate over the male sex on the social front, rather it is an avenue through which women are allowed to examine and experience a part of sexuality that would otherwise have been closed to them. There has always been a taboo related to male penetrability and through BL, women are allowed to cross the boundaries of that taboo. It has been discussed already how the idea of equality is one of the major factors that draws women to read and draw BL. Here too, there seems to be that underlying desire for equality, not only at a metaphorical level or an emotional and social level, but a literal, physical one.

***“It does not matter whether one is homosexual (homo), lesbian (rezu), or heterosexual (hetero). Gentle feelings. Let’s live powerfully.”***

- Watanabe Ajia, “Watanabe Ajia goes to the NY Gay Parade”, *Boy’s Piasu*, Nov 2008, 109.

Given that we have now established *fujoshi* as a somewhat hidden community of women located somewhere outside the mainstream, we can examine how BL allows the *fujoshi* community to function as a space where discourse on lesbian, queer and feminist activism can take place. This is not to say that all authors and readers of BL set out with the purpose of making distinct feminist statements, though there are some mangaka who are self-confessed feminists, such as Yoshinaga Fumi, author of *Antique Bakery* and many other works acclaimed for their realism and inclusion of sympathetic female characters.

While the traditional BL formulae are still widely adhered to in most new manga, many titles are exploring concepts of homosexuality further. There are stories with characters who identify gay, the authors of which use their characters to explore the idea of homosexuality in society further and seek ways to overcome existing discrimination and negative stereotypes. The idealised future constitutes activism at the level of representation, then. Many authors are thinking of what happens to gay men in Japanese society from their position of ‘*yaoi* sexuality’. Mizoguchi believes that even with the BL formulae, there is a very real activist power in the representations of homosexuality as an accepted, natural part of society.

Further, the BL genre constantly questions and pushes boundaries of accepted societal norms, the gender system and human sexuality, including marriage, reproduction and parenthood, traditional concepts of family and non-biological family. Discussions on these topics are generally avoided for being “too serious” among women as per societal expectations, but through the bonds of community and being the subjects of sexual desire, the readers of BL are comfortable enough talking about their sexuality. As such, the BL community is a suitable arena for feminist discourse despite the fact that a very small number of its members are declared feminists. It is a “dynamic space allows women to participate in issues of female sexuality and identity such as bisexuality, homosociality and other modes that contest the hierarchised heterosexual paradigm.” (Nagaike, 99) However, there is never a conscious effort to politicise this space. The *fujoshi* community is essentially women

who think that they are only chatting about their fantasies, reading and enjoying them and not realising how they are contributing to activist causes, and it is possibly this lack of awareness that has kept the form so active and thriving.

Also, well in keeping with the feminist agenda is how through BL, women are given a chance to exercise their erotic imaginations, to write and create texts with the safety of knowing that they will not be condemned for doing so. The *fujoshi* 'sisterhood' that writes and encourages others to write is a space for women to take their own libidos into their own hands without fear of being outcasts or misfits. They are free from the guilt that they would otherwise face as a result of the reactions of society in general, and their own psychologies in particular. BL is a space for the exploration of the "inexhaustible female imaginary", as Cixous would put it. The encouragement to write that *fujoshi* give each other are similar to what Cixous says in "The Laugh of the Medusa" when she exhorts women to write, even if it is to "take the edge off", paralleling writing with the act of masturbation implying that women writing feel a similar sort of guilt. "Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man... and not yourself." (Cixous, 426)

This, Rosi Braidotti theorises, is what the feminist project and feminist theory should really be about.

What the feminism of sexual difference wants to free in women is ... their desire for freedom, justice, self-accomplishment and well being: the subversive laughter of Dionysus as opposed to the seriousness of the Apollonian spirit. This political process ... does not aim at the glorification of the feminine, but rather its actualisation or empowerment as a political project aimed at alternative female subjectivities. (306)

It is therefore possible to say that the appeal of the Boys' Love genre lies in the ability for women to take charge over the right to express their own sexuality without any lingering Freudian guilt, to play with texts and worlds that were thus far closed to them by virtue of they being within the domain of male domination and due to an inaccessible erotics, and subvert societal expectations of innocence.



## CONCLUSION

Pair boys up with a slash; 'cause we like it like that  
We love anime even more when it's gay!  
Others sneer, "They're not queer!" Oh of course they're not, dear.  
They just act like they're fruits 'cause it's sexy.  
You can scoff, you can flame, but still I'll love my boys. You can bash, you can  
hate, but it won't change my mind.

- The Yaoi Theme Song<sup>1</sup>

Whether subversive or revolutionary, whether the work of a giggly teenager with 'boy meets boy' fantasies or a hardened feminist struggling with her own sexuality in a society that would rather she didn't, the Boys' Love phenomenon and the psychology of its production are worth an examination. And so we stand on the other side of my observations in the world of girls who create boy-on-boy romances, and we are in a position to see that they are not merely driven by the dictum of "it's hot", as one commenter on a forum put it. The 'hotness' is, admittedly, a very important factor in the creation process, but we have seen how the Boys' Love genre runs beyond being simple romps in the hay with exquisitely coiffed *bishounen*.

When examined merely in the form of graphic narratives, BL stories serve to highlight the gap between reality and the unsatisfied yearnings of women who have begun to be dissatisfied with the inadequacy of heterosexual relationships with their unequal power structures and patriarchal overtones. In the ideal world of their own creation is possible an equality that society generally does not offer them. This is a world where rape is not "the crime, typically committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with the offender against their will" but an act of supreme love, a means by which a character reveals his inability to control his own sexual urges due to his overwhelming love for the other; a world where women do not exist for the simple reason that they would remind the readers of their own gender and shatter the illusion of the gaytopia; a world where the penetrating partner always takes care of his lover's orgasm before he achieves his own.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://kupika.com/diarypage.php?id=r46b8dc074eb9fxnlzto>, retrieved May 2011

Outside of the text, BL becomes even more significant when examined in terms of feminist theory (as a means of female expression) and as a mode of pornography for women by women, a mode in which many identify sexually with androgynous men at an age when they are beginning to construct their own gendered identities. Even though there can be said to be an element of escapism in making woman-free narratives and therefore refusing to confront their own repressed sexuality, the genre by its very existence, and the explicitness of its content, is radical in rejecting mainstream gender roles and gender ideologies. The BL manga defy both closely regarded ideas of censorship and morality by being *shamelessly* pornographic, by opposing discourses that seek to restrain and channel female sexuality into patriarchal institutions. They defy the dominant narratives of mainstream popular and pornography by giving women a chance to ‘play’ with male bodies and male-male romances in a way that is usually the man’s prerogative, to manipulate female bodies.

The manga also facilitates the building of a fan community where free dialogue is possible, predicated on a knowledge of shared ‘perversion’, a group of women with the same ‘dirty little secret’. Not only readers of BL, but also the writers, producers of the texts, are part of this community, and there is constant scope for interaction and exchange of ideas and experiences between women on both sides of the texts.

There remain several aspects of Boys’ Love manga that require further research, for instance the politics of identification with regard to Butler’s theories on performativity of gender. Also significant is the fact that BL, in spite of being a purely Japanese phenomenon, has developed such a large readership and fandom outside the country of its origin. The role that the internet plays in the dispersion of this fandom is important – without the existence of scanlations of unlicensed manga, there would be little means for international fans to access the texts. It also remains to be seen how far the influence of BL on popular culture will affect current queer and feminist discourses which for the most part ignore its existence at present. It remains to be seen whether, ten years after the last *yaoi* debate, the objections raised against it still hold. However, regardless of whatever criticism the fangirls face as a result of their ‘perversion’, as the ‘Yaoi Theme Song’ quoted at the start of this concluding section claims, the membership of the *fujoshi* community gives them a certain degree of strength to overcome any criticism they may face: “You can bash, you can hate, but it won’t change my mind.”

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