# *Manga*: The Queer or The Patriarchal?

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WRITER'S COMMENT: At first, the concepts of Queer were elusive to me. I figured that perhaps relating the abstract through something concrete, like a film or a book, would aid in my Queer Studies final paper discussion. I flipped through my mind's catalogue: Fanny Hill? Ancient. Brokeback Mountain? Typical. Harry Potter and the Allegedly Gay Dumbledore? Flimsy. Queer As Folk? No. Sailormoon? Childish— or is it? After some research on manga, I discovered the potential for a critical discussion of Sailormoon and manga itself. Yet my thoughts were still all over the place, incoherent and confusing. It wasn't until I ventured outside the realm of manga and studied androgyny and the transvestite patriarchy that my ideas of manga, sex, gender, and Queer crystallized to form the argument I wanted to present. Suddenly, everything just clicked. The process of working out my paper was illuminating for me. The product, I hope, will be as illuminating for anyone else who reads it.
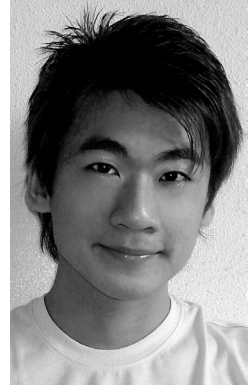
—Kenny Wei Lun Liew

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Kenny Liew's essay emerged from an assignment in Women's Studies 170, "Queer Studies." Students were asked to apply a course concept to a topic of their choosing, using work by other scholars to build their argument. Kenny's paper stood out for its extraordinary depth of research; he had done a true review of the literature, which is rare at the undergraduate level. He had also found an exciting topic—manga certainly has a subcultural following, but it requires a lot of cross-cultural translation to understand. Even as he clarified any number of things about manga as a genre, Kenny managed to write about complicated concepts in queer studies, some of them rather jargony, without losing control of his sentence structure or argument. The result is deeply informative and analytically precise about the different kinds of manga and their queer potential. Overall, Kenny's essay reads as the work of a real scholar.

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Manga (Japanese comics), a large segment of Japanese mainstream pop culture, is seldom readily identified as queer. Its plethora of discrete categories, all insistent on specifying their target demographic, is mainly circumscribed by age and the heteronormative gender binary: boys/girls, male youth/female youth, adult male/adult female.[1] A few subgenres of *manga* explicitly depict homosexual themes, even if they are not marketed to a gay or lesbian audience. However, most of mainstream *manga* do not explicitly represent such themes.

In analyzing *manga* and its characterizing features as a cultural text, I want to show that they try to subvert the Japanese patriarchal gender structure, which stands for the heteronormative. In the realm of *shōjo manga* (girls comics), the trait of *kawaii*, or cuteness, prevalent in its heroines, reinforces stereotypical Japanese gender roles. And yet when these heroines acquire magical powers, they can deviate from established norms and take up roles which are not typically "feminine." Other unique subgenres of *manga*, such as the *rorikon manga* and *ladies comics*, laced with erotic images, may appeal to heterosexual male and female desires, respectively. They, however, also provide readers access to multiple avenues for gender and/or sexual identification and cross-identification. Another typifying feature of *manga* is its staple character type of the *bishōnen*, who appears in mainstream *manga* and the subgenre of boy-boy comics. This character type of the beautiful male, possessing both masculine and feminine qualities, also blurs the boundaries of the gender binary.

As such I posit that *manga*, in its capacity for re-negotiating and re-defining sex, gender, and sexuality, plays with and perverts hegemonic notions embedded in contemporary patriarchal Japanese society: it moves away from what might be called "normativity." And as "queerness" can be seen as anything that is *above, under, beside, across, to the left*, etc. from that starting point of normativity, a queer perspective is thus very useful in understanding *manga*. But still, in certain ways, *manga* undercuts itself by reinforcing the very gender binary and cultural norms that it tries to move away from.

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[1]Mary Grigsby, "The Social Production of Gender as Reflected in Two Japanese Culture Industry Products: *Sailormoon* and *Crayon Shin-chan*," in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy,* ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1999), 190.

Kawaii: Moving Away From or Going Along With Gender Norms?

The concept of *kawaii* is quintessential to both Japanese mass culture and *manga*—the bedrock from which legions of cute characters have emerged. Even though *kawaii* literally means "cute," its connotations proliferate. Kanako Siokawa identifies the most salient quality of *kawaii* as "the complete lack of anything observably threatening."[2] The style of *manga*, especially in the early fifties, is also recognized as *kawaii* for its simplicity of smooth and round contours in drawing;[3] it lacked shading and cross-hatching which would have produced more realistic, and thus possibly more threatening, images.

Females were subsumed into the category of *kawaii* during the Shogunate period, when the patriarchal ideology delineating females as "docile, dependent and demure" became rooted in a Japanese society influenced by neo-Confucianism.[4] This gendered concept of *kawaii*, I postulate, shaped the trajectory of postwar *manga* and its representations of females. This can be discerned most in comics targeted at teenage girls, otherwise known as *shōjo manga*.

Shōjo manga was created by men in its early stages, and as a result often featured a sexist ideal of a Japanese female: subservient, docile, one who aims to fulfill her household duties,[5] and more importantly, nonthreatening. This stereotype of a submissive and deferential female in *shōjo manga* is propagated by relegating the female to passivity and domesticity.

In the fifties to sixties *manga* industry, girls in *shōjo manga* were denoted as *kawaii* by physical features, notably (1) having large eyes, dotted with stars, sparkles or glitter, and (2) lacking secondary sexual features such as breasts.[6] Tezuka Osamu, revered as the "*father* of *manga*," conceived his female protagonist, Sapphire, of *Princess Knight* under such a model,[7] and yet in other ways, she pushes against traditional notions of

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[2]Kanako Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics," in Lent, ed., *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning*, 94.

[3]Ibid., 95.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Paul Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Laurence King, 2004), 74.

[6]Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly," 101.

[7]Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years*, 77.

femininity associated with *kawaii*. Sapphire, as a cross-dressing princess, is able to experience life as both a girl and a boy. She takes on the role of a prince, excels in swordplay, and thwarts the plans of adversaries who want to take over her kingdom.[8] In this context, even though she is physically marked as *kawaii,* she is allowed to be threatening. These motifs and scenarios of violence and danger were, at the time, more in line with the expectations of boys' comics, *shōnen manga*, rather than *shōjo manga*, as she is ultimately in control of issues beyond the domestic domain. As such, one could argue that *Princess Knight* challenged the stereotypical gender role representations.

In the end, however, the *manga* capitulates by letting Sapphire have her male soul purged in order to live happily ever after with her Prince Charming. In what could potentially be empowering, and queer, for girls of *shōjo manga*, *Princess Knight* shortchanges itself. Instead of impugning gender norms, it gives way to patriarchy, endorsing the idea that women should aim for a husband and family. Tezuka's treatment of the character reinforces the gender binary; he asserts that a person's soul must be either male or female, and presents Sapphire as an anomaly to be fixed in order to return to (hetero)normativity. So, though seemingly progressive at first, *Princess Knight* is rendered regressive, reverting to a gender structure it had first set out to contest. It also aligns masculinity with power, as manifested in Sapphire who has to dress as a prince to overcome crime to save her kingdom. In having both a male and female soul, she can express her femininity only by dressing up as a girl in secret. Femininity is a liability in the public sphere of her kingdom, which demands her to be powerful, or in other words, masculine. Masculinity can also be a liability, but only for the female, who is assumed to only desire consummating heterosexual relationships.

Despite its regressive aspects, *Princess Knight* had an impact on *shōjo manga*, inspiring women writers who took over the genre from male writers, giving rise to the subgenre of *mahō shōjo*, girls with magical powers.[9] A prominent example is *Sailormoon*[10] by female writer Takeuchi Naoko, featuring Usagi, a girl who can transform magically into Sailormoon, the leader of an all-female fighting team. The name Usagi is Japanese for

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[8]Ibid., 82.

[9]Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years*, 78.

[10]Naoko Takeuchi, *Bishōjo Senshi Sailormoon* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1992–1997).

"rabbit," evoking the cute image of a fluffy animal. Usagi accesses her alter-ego, Sailormoon, whose magical powers engender her capacity to be threatening. The Sailor Soldiers are bestowed these powers to save the world, and men, from evil, as opposed to being just ornamental characters needing to be saved. *Sailormoon* deviates from previous incarnates of the *shōjo* heroine. Even though she does end up with her boyfriend Mamoru, she is shown doing so by choice and does not need to sacrifice her magical powers to be in union with her husband, unlike Sapphire who has to sacrifice her power of masculinity. *Sailormoon* exemplifies the product of a *shōjo manga* informed by female sensibilities, through which writers such as Takeuchi can create their female leads who are "cute" but also "stronger than men."[11] *Sailormoon* expands the repertoire of *kawaii* even if it does not completely unhinge *kawaii* from patriarchal notions of the docile female.

Rorikon: Cross-Identification or Maintaining Status Quo?

THE SUBGENRE OF *RORIKON* ALSO FEATURES the *kawaii* girl but this time in an overtly sexual context. *Rorikon* is an abbreviation of the Lolita Complex, a phrase derived from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, referring to the predisposition of middle-aged men to be sexually obsessed with prepubescent girls.[12] This theme defines the *rorikon*, which is primarily produced and consumed by males.[13] The mandatory sexualized young female characters are typically curvaceous and dressed seductively, yet still possess a childlike quality, the latter feature being what Akira Akagi observes as *kawaii*.[14] The girls are taken advantage of sexually and constantly forced to submit to male characters. Yet I posit that, interestingly, the male readers are allowed, if not compelled, to associate and identify with those female characters.

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[11]Grigsby, "The Social Production of Gender," 199.

[12]Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japan Society* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 122.

[13]Setsu Shigematsu, "Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics,"in Lent, ed., *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning*, 129.

[14]In Shigematsu, "Dimensions of Desire," 130. Shigematsu cites Akira Akagi, "Bishōjo Shōkōgun rorikon to iu yokubō (The Beautiful Young Girl Syndrome: The Desire Known as *Rorikon*)." *New Feminism Review* 3 (1993): 230–34.

Akagi explains that through the absence of the "face" of the male transgressor and the occasional replacement of the penis with other phallic substitutes, *rorikon* casts the spotlight solely onto the violated young girls, on their expressions of forced pleasure, which would arouse the reader.[15] I argue that because depictions of the presumably more relatable male characters (for the predominantly male audience of *rorikon*) are missing, readers are impelled to identify with the female character. Thus, I concur with Akagi's assertion that "*rorikon* facilities a reversal of gender positions in the processes of identification."[16]

In addition, Sharon Kinsella points out that some *rorikon* involve girls who actually possess male genitalia,[17] revealing their hidden masculinity. Co-existing physical attributes of both genders in one entity could possibly expedite identification so that the reader (regardless of sex) can first relate with familiar characteristics, then access relatively unknown ones. I thus propose that beyond just identifying with the character of the opposite sex, the reader is also encouraged to incorporate these qualities of the opposite gender into their own sense of self. Similarly, Shigematsu writes that in *ladies comics*, which are pornographic comics targeted at a female audience, the page layouts also facilitate identification across multiple positions: the male character, the female character, and the voyeur.[18] This is because the panels of the *manga* are drawn in a configuration that allows a reader to take on the perspectives of these different roles.

I argue that the opening up of multiple avenues for identification in *rorikon* and *ladies comics* is in itself a driving force for its readers to renegotiate their initial sense of gender. As a result, *rorikon* and *ladies comics*, while facilely symbolizing a heterosexual desire for the eroticized characters on its printed pages, can also be seen as queer because they underscore the cross-identification between boundaries of gender and/or sex.

Yet, while the *rorikon* girl functions as a site for a queer transgression across gender boundaries, she is built upon an underlying notion of heteronormativity. To explain her double-edged nature, I first dismiss Frederik Schodt's claim that *rorikon* portrays images of young girls only

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[15]Summarized in Shigematsu, 130.
[16]Quoted in Shigematsu, 131.
[17]Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 122.
[18]Shigematsu, "Dimensions of Desire," 144–145.

because child nudity is not subject to scrutiny by the authorities.[19] He alleges that male artists circumvent any restrictions in the depiction of nudity when they use young girls as replacements for mature women who "cannot be realistically depicted" enacting sexually explicit scenes. By analyzing this phenomenon of infantilizing females, I argue that young girls are not chosen purely for the sake of convenience.

Consumers of *rorikon* may prefer reading about young girls—instead of older women—being subjugated to physical and sexual domination because they find older women less tractable. Drawing on Akagi's stand that "it is not the age of the girl that is attractive, but a form of 'cuteness,'" and on my aforementioned discussion of *kawaii* as being non-threatening, I argue that it is not *age* but the relative *powerlessness* of young girls that accounts for the infantilization of females in *rorikon*. I then infer that the rising popularity of *rorikon*[20] could imply that Japanese males find it difficult to handle increasingly empowered women in the Japanese society, and they cope by infantilizing them into harmless, nonthreatening figures. This conjecture is substantiated by Kinsella's observation that *rorikon* "reflects an awareness of the increasing power and centrality of young women in [Japanese] society." [21] She also writes that young men in particular cannot deal with the possibility of Japanese women gaining greater autonomy. As such, *rorikon* reveals an endeavour to maintain the status quo of the patriarchal gender dichotomy of male/female.

Bishōnen: Blurring of Boundaries or Transvestite Patriarchy?

I NOW SHIFT THE FOCUS to the pseudo-counterpart of the *rorikon* girl: the *bishōnen,* who is the beautiful male character, more often than not a childlike boy, possessing both masculine and feminine qualities. While there is seldom a shortage of token *bishōnen* in mainstream *manga*, he is most represented in boy-boy comics. Boy-boy comics are affiliated with *shōjo manga*, written by females, for females, yet its content revolve mainly around male homosexual relationships; it conflates the subgenres of (1) *shōnen-ai,* which focuses on the romantic aspects of the *bishōnen*, and (2) *yaoi*, which is more adamant in its emphasis on (homosexual) sex

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[19]Frederik L. Schodt, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Kodansha International Ltd. Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, 1983), 136.

[20]Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, 122.

[21]Ibid.

rather than romance or even plot.[22] Many theorists read the *bishōnen* in boy-boy comics as resisting the patriarchal gender structure. According to Andrea Wood, boy-boy comics "[suggest] certain dissatisfactions with the fantasies offered by mainstream media and traditional heteronormative romance."[23] Mark McLelland writes that the *bishōnen* also shed light on the ambivalence and conflict that Japanese women experience with traditional images of masculinity.[24] These congruent observations are extended by Midori Matsui's argument that the androgynous *bishōnen* is employed as "an anarchic alternative that breaks down the priggish definitions of male and female sexuality."[25] I also argue that, apart from trying to subvert existing gender structures, the *bishōnen* body serves as an emblem for the antinormative, for it itself blurs the distinction of sex differences between male and female. Yet there are instances where *bishōnen* undermines itself to reinforce the gender binary.

In *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference,* Kari Weil distinguishes between the *androgyne* and the *hermaphrodite*:

> *Androgyne* suggests a spiritual or psychological state of wholeness and balance arrived at through the joining of masculine and feminine conceived of as complementary and symmetrically opposed. *Hermaphrodite*, on the other hand, calls attention to the visible and physiological fact of two differently sexed but noncomplementary bodies brought together in an unrelieved process of joining and splitting that manifests the irreparable divisions wrought by desire.[26]

In this framework, I would categorise the *rorikon* girl who sprouts male genitalia as *hermaphrodite* because s/he is physically marked as both female and male, and the *bishōnen* as *androgyne*. He is, as McLelland states, "a

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[22]See Andrea Wood, "'Straight' Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga And The Rise Of A Counterpublic," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, Iss. 1/2 (2006): par. 13.

[23]Ibid., par. 26.

[24]Mark McLelland, "Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Japan," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 3 (2000), par. 23.

[25]Midori Matsui, "Little girls were little boys: Displaced femininity in the representation of homosexuality in Japanese girls' comics," in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, ed. Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 179.

[26]Kari Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (University Press of Virginia, 1992), 63.

very specific construction or, better, 'fantasy'" which essentially is "an androgynous ideal."[27] And it is the "state of wholeness" of the *androgyne* that is what would constitute this "ideal."

I, however, argue that the notions of masculine and feminine in the *androgyne* are not "symmetrical" as Weil might have it. In fact, the gender binary observed in *manga* is asymmetrical, not linear but hierarchical, with males placed on top, which once again recalls a patriarchal pattern. The trend of portraying *bishōnen* not only as beautiful and desired[28] but also in power correlates with his "state of wholeness in which nothing is lacking."[29] Exemplars of the androgynous *bishōnen* include *Sesshōmaru* of *Inuyasha*[30] in *shōnen manga*, the boys of *Hana yori Dango*[31] in *shōjo manga*, *Kinomoto Tōya* and *Yue* of *Cardcaptor Sakura*[32] in *mahō shōjo*, and *Eiri Yuki* of *Gravitation*[33] in *yaoi*. As a pervasive character type spanning multiple genres, the *bishōnen* may be referred to as *beautiful, desired, feared, revered, rich, creative, skillful, sociable*, but, most importantly, *powerful*. With this in mind, I argue that in *manga* the power of the *bishōnen* is not only in his androgynous wholeness, but also—and chiefly—in his fundamentally male body.

Weil further explains that the Aristophanes' *androgyne* is reminiscent of the biblical Adam, who is whole before Eve is removed from him, sending them into a disunity of sex.[34] The *hermaphrodite* is an Ovidian concept; Salmacis's desire for Hermaphroditus causes her to try to fuse herself with him, spawning a single form embodying a confused disjuncture of male and female. This was precipitated by the female desire for the other sex and perhaps the phallus. So while "androgyny precedes the fall, [the hermaphrodite] embodies the fallen state."[35] As such androgyny is often seen as the superior of the two because it signifies what existed

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[27]Mark McLelland, "Male Homosexuality."

[28]Midori Matsui, "Little girls were little boys," 179.

[29]Kari Weil, *Androgyny*, 18.

[30]Takahashi Rumiko, *Sengoku Otogizōshi Inuyasha* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1996).

[31]Kamio Yoko, *Hana Yori Dango* (Tokyo: Shueisha, 1992–2003).

[32]Clamp, *Kādokyaputā Sakura* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996–2000).

[33]Murakami Maki, *Gravitation* (Gentosha, 1996–2002).

[34]Kari Weil, *Androgyny*, 18.

[35]Ibid.

before the disunity, while the *hermaphrodite* is an oxymoronic dysphoria of male and female.

The *bishōnen* is not Sapphire who needs to purge her masculinity which was her source of power. He is not Sailormoon who needs to tap into an alter-ego to access his powers. His is not the *rorikon hermaphrodite* disempowered by her infantilization. The *bishōnen* is the male who has subsumed feminine qualities but also retains his masculine power because, simply, he is still male. The *bishōnen* is the Adam who represents the wholeness before disunity, superior to the *hermaphrodite* whose basis is the inferior female body of Salmacis and her *manga* incarnates who in heterosexual narratives desire to fuse with the male. In doing so, the *bishōnen* at once blurs the gender binary of male and female in its androgynous body and also supports a gender hierarchy which performs under the assumption that sexual difference exists and the male is superior to the female.

Hotohori, a *bishōnen* character in *Fushigi Yūgi,*[36] not only possesses feminine beauty; the revelation that he is male makes his feminine beauty even more mysterious and formidable. And apart from his other positive traits, Hotohori's power is also palpable as he is the king of a country. He is the visual allegory of what Ueno would term the transvestite patriarchy.[37] The *bishōnen* is the male who crosses female boundaries and yet he loses nothing, retaining his privileges of being male, including the power of the male in a patriarchal system.

Manga: Queer *and* Patriarchal?

Patriarchal Japanese society politically invests in concepts such as the gender binary and the nuclear family, which I note are heteronormative. I have shown how features that typify *manga*—namely (1) the diverse meanings of *kawaii*, (2) avenues in *rorikon* and even *ladies comics* for identification and cross-identification across sex and gender boundaries, and (3) the *bishōnen,* who blurs those boundaries in his own body—can subvert patriarchy and the gender binary. These instances, when *manga* moves away from the heteronormative as its locus, are where

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[36]Watase Yuu, *Fushigi Yūgi* (Tokyo: Shogakukun, 1992–1996).

[37]Chizuko Ueno, "In the Feminine Guise: A Trap of Reverse Orientalism," in *Contemporary Japanese Thought*, ed. Richard F. Calichman (Columbia University Press, 2005), 241.

I discern what is queer about *manga*. However I have also highlighted how *manga* can walk away from normativity, and undermine itself by stumbling back upon the hegemonic notions it was thought to be deviating from, as in the case of *Princess Knight* and *rorikon*.

With the *bishōnen*, Ueno's idea of a transvestite patriarchy includes what is both queer *and* patriarchal. She is critical of her own concept because "patriarchy is patriarchy"[38] even if it cloaks itself under something perfunctorily queer, such as males transgressing into the feminine domain, because they still maintain the status quo, a gender hierarchy with males on top. While this cannot be immediately perceived as *moving away* from heteronormative patriarchy, *manga* in this aspect still fractures the system of cultural norms by (I reiterate) playing with and perverting it. So *manga* is not only a site where concepts of cross-identification and blurring of boundaries between masculinity and femininity can be visualized, it is queer in moving away from and at least colliding with these hegemonic planes to change how we may see them. The fantastical world of *manga*, then, which is not always readily identifiable as queer in a Japanese society, can still shed light on the antagonistic relation between queer and patriarchy and on the proliferative nature of queer itself.

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[38]Ibid.

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