
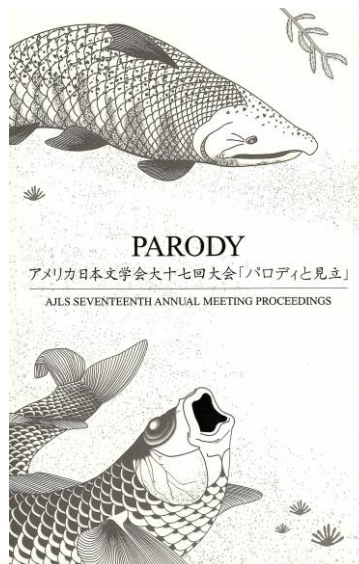


“Doubly Parodied Gender Roles in *Yaoi* Narratives:
Male Characters Become Homosexuals, Who then
Become ‘Women’”

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**DOUBLY PARODIED GENDER ROLES IN YAOI NARRATIVES:
MALE CHARACTERS BECOME HOMOSEXUALS, WHO THEN
BECOME “WOMEN”**

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During the early 1970s, many Japanese women started writing and reading novels and comic books that featured narratives of male-male romance and eroticism, and nowadays this genre of male homosexual narrative, commonly called *yaoi*, is widely acknowledged as a significant component of Japanese popular culture. However, the genuinely revolutionary wave of the *yaoi* tradition only arrived in the 1990s, when a large number of comic books, novels, and monthly magazines dealing with male same-sex relationships began to constitute a large sector of the Japanese book market, with many *yaoi* artists consistently attaining the bestseller list. Nowadays, almost 150 *yaoi manga* comic books and novels are published each month, along with more than 30 *yaoi manga* magazines (monthly, bimonthly, or seasonal issues).

During the 1980s, the popular genre of female-oriented narratives of male homosexuality had expanded, when what is called the *ani-paro* (*anime*-parody) culture emerged. Certain Japanese female artists started recasting the male characters in popular animations, *manga*, and other genres in homosexual pairings.¹ They thus established a female-oriented community, in which their *dōjinshi* (amateur writings) were produced, circulated and consumed. Now there are a number of gatherings for amateur *dōjinshi* writers, which take place all over Japan. The biggest of these *dōjinshi* gatherings is called *komike* (an abbreviation for ‘Comic Market’), which is held twice a year in Tokyo. More than 30,000 groups, comprised of approximately one million people, participate in this event. During each *komike* gathering, approximately 5 million copies of *dōjinshi* works are circulated, with sales totaling more than 30 million dollars.²

It is apparent that *yaoi dōjinshi*, as amateur writings, are relatively loosely censored and escape severely market-oriented constraints. Thus, *yaoi dōjinshi* include a wide variety of themes and subjects and

¹ See Nishimura Mari 2002 for more details regarding the history of the *aniparo-yaoi* tradition.

² These numbers are cited from Nishimura 2002. Even though these amateur gatherings are not exclusively designed for *yaoi* fans, more than 70% of people who are involved in these gatherings are supposedly *yaoi* fans, according to Nishimura.

consequently reveal more subversive, innovative capacities in relation to women's orientations than more obviously commercial *yaoi* publications do. In this presentation, I will focus in particular on a subgenre of *yaoi dōjinshi*, called *yaoi/yuri* or *nyotaika* works. The concept of gender-twist (or parody) in *yaoi dōjinshi* is taken even farther in cases where male homosexual characters are depicted as biologically female. Works featuring biologically feminized male characters are called *nyotaika*, and these feminized characters are sometimes even presented as partners in lesbian couples. Such works are categorized as belonging to the *yuri* subgenre of *yaoi*, since the term *yuri* refers to lesbianism. In these *yaoi dōjinshi*, male characters are often first parodied as partners in male-homosexual couples; then, one or more of these characters are transformed to become biologically female; these feminized characters then experience life as women and sometimes become partners in lesbian couples. Why are these male homosexual characters fantasized as biologically female? Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern parody in the following manner: "Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation—in any medium."³ Thus, following Hutcheon's idea of postmodern parody, I will argue that *yaoi yuri* and *nyotaika dōjinshi* represent subversive gender parodies which enable prevailing theories of sexuality and gender to be explored and challenged.

As such critics as Nishimura Mari and Nobi Nobita have suggested, issues surrounding *yuri* and *nyotaika* are frequently featured by *yaoi* producers, to such an extent that parodies of popular *manga* and *anime* (or other genres) as *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika dōjinshi* have become commonplace.⁴ The number of *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika dōjinshi* is too numerous to count. For example, characters from such popular *shōnen manga* and animations as *Gundam*, *Hagane no renkinjutsushi* (Full Metal Alchemist), *Bleach*, and so forth are frequently featured as feminized male characters, and sometimes as a lesbian couple.

Nishimura Mari, a critic of *yaoi dōjinshi*, suggests that the feminization of *yaoi* characters can be closely associated with the enormous success of the animated work, *Sailor Moon*, in the early 1990s. *Sailor Moon* is the first animation that features *shōjo* characters as martial-arts fighters. After *Sailor Moon*, animations that feature fighting girls become too numerous to count, so that now this constitutes one of

³ Hutcheon 2002, p. 94.

⁴ See Nishimura 2002 and Nobi 2003 for further details.

the major themes in Japanese animation. As critics such as Saitō Minako have pointed out, historically fighting had previously been depicted primarily as an attribute of male characters in Japanese animation, while *shōjo* characters often played passive roles as the helpers (or rewards) of male fighters.⁵ However, since the success of *Sailor Moon*, the number of animations which employ the motif of fighting *shōjo* has significantly increased. According to Sharalyn Orbaugh, the fighting women in Japanese animations possess the potentially subversive characteristics inherent to the *shōjo* identity; now that *shōjo* can fight, just as men do, this raises the question of gender hybridity even more strongly.⁶ Saitō Tamaki, a Japanese psychologist, takes a similar approach, defining the *shōjo* characters in *Sailor Moon* and other animations that feature fighting *shōjo* as “phallic girls”—i.e. girls who possess the male attribute of a phallus.⁷ The elaboration of female gender characteristics in *Sailor Moon* somehow avoids inscribing femaleness with any of the constraining features of gender, and this has also facilitated the depiction of “phallic girl” characters in *yaoi dōjinshi*.

Even though the *yaoi* genre originally tended to disregard women (or femaleness) to a greater or lesser extent, after the success of *Sailor Moon* such negative gender constraints were at least partially nullified in the realm of representation. Thus, partly in reaction to the removal of these constraints, the creators of *yaoi* began to elaborate on *yuri* and *nyotaika* themes which are more associated with issues of femininity per se. In *Sailor Moon*, a *dōjinshi* created by *yaoi* fans, the two characters who appear most frequently are Haruka and Michiru. Although both are biologically women, they look exactly like a *yaoi* couple; like a *seme* (taking a masculine role) in *yaoi* tradition, Haruka is taller, handsome, and protective while, like a *uke* (taking a feminine role), Michiru is shorter, more *kawaii* (cute), and protected.⁸ There are also further examples of Haruka and Michiru *dōjinshi* which have been created by *yaoi* fans. Haruka became very popular among *yaoi* fans, precisely because she possesses clear male attributes, even though she is biologically female.

In *yaoi/yuri dōjinshi*, both of the main characters are depicted as partners in lesbian couples. Can we possibly analyze these particular

⁵ See Saitō Minako 2001 for further details.

⁶ See Orbaugh 2003 for further details.

⁷ See Saitō Tamaki 2006 for further details.

⁸ The convention of depicting *yaoi* characters generally reinforces the binary oppositional relationship between the penetrating *seme* character and the penetrated *uke* character in ways that appear parallel to a heterosexual orientation.

narratives in terms of the subconscious lesbian desires of female readers? Mizoguchi Akiko, a critic of the *yaoi* tradition and self-identified lesbian, once said that *yaoi* works encouraged her lesbian identity, and that she views *yaoi* characters as women or lesbians in drag.⁹ Mizoguchi's remark seems to reflect some of the reasons for the popularity of *yuri* narratives in *yaoi dōjinshi*. However, one of the thematic points that I would like to emphasize here is premised on the gender-twist involved in women's act of feminizing male characters. There is a specific, established genre of lesbian parodies of the biologically female characters in *dōjinshi*. (This can be termed "authentic" *yuri dōjinshi*, as opposed to *yaoi/yuri dōjinshi*). The fact that *yaoi* works generally do not include female characters, but instead take such trouble to feminize male characters, in order to stimulate their readers' imaginative impulses, requires consideration. These *yaoi/yuri* fantasies reveal subconscious female desires for something more than socially constructed femaleness. They thus attempt to rewrite gendered narratives by producing multiple, shifting, and hybrid gender-parodies. As several scholars have pointed out, the readership of *yaoi* is overwhelmingly comprised of heterosexual women. (However, this does not mean that lesbians can or should be excluded from consideration in discussing *yaoi* writing and reading activities). Moreover, this analysis of gender parody in *yaoi dōjinshi* should be premised on a consideration of the representations which are fantasized by Japanese women, rather than on these women's practical sexual orientations.

In *yaoi/yuri dōjinshi*, readers are never able to overlook the fact that these biologically feminized characters were originally their favorite male characters. This constitutes a discernible difference between authentic *yuri dōjinshi* and *yaoi/yuri dōjinshi*. The textuality of the male body (and of masculinity per se) is inscribed in these feminized characters from the beginning. This hybrid gender (that is, the combination of masculinity and femininity) should be discussed as a subversive form of gender discourse which parodies all of the socially constructed myths regarding gender. For example, one *dōjinshi* which parodies the male characters in the popular *shōnen manga*/animation *Captain Tsubasa* is entitled "Ai no sirayuri" (The White Lily of Love). In this *dōjinshi* work, characters who are male football players in the original story are parodied as a lesbian couple and the female students in a girls' school. In the scenes depicting sexual intercourse, suddenly their male sexual organs pop out (including graphic depictions of erection and penetration). In this narrative, gender twist (or parody) has the effect of

⁹ See Mizoguchi 2007 for further details.

an endless interplay of gender identities. The characters are first parodied as homosexual, then biologically feminized, and finally inscribed as possessing penises only when they actually engage in intercourse. Another example of *yaoi/nyotaika dōjinshi*, “Okini mesu mama” (As You Like), involves a male homosexual parody of *Tenisu no ōjisama* (The Prince of Tennis), another very popular *shōnen manga/animation*. In this *dōjinshi*, one of the characters is biologically transformed into a woman, as the result of a secret scientific experiment. After being transformed into a woman, he is penetrated by the other male characters. However, when he is then transformed back into a man, he penetrates the other male characters, who have accidentally become biological women. In this way, *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika* works can be viewed as symbolic narratives which clearly demonstrate many women’s fascination with the concept of hybrid gender.

As I mentioned earlier, due to the marketing strategies of publishing companies, professional *yaoi* authors seem to experience more constraints on their creations than do amateur authors. Thus, *yuri* and *nyotaika* features are rarely observed in widely marketed *yaoi* works. However, the vital importance of “gender trouble” can similarly be seen in popular *yaoi* works depicting hermaphrodite characters. Such works featuring hermaphrodites constitute an established subgenre of popular *yaoi*, demonstrating the sexual dynamism which is inscribed in the complexities of *yaoi*’s gender configurations. For example, in a *yaoi* work titled *Sex Pistol* (serialized in *MAGAZINE BE-BOY*, Libre Publisher), one of the main characters (who is biologically male) succeeds in acquiring a vagina, by using special chemicals. Thus, he becomes a hermaphrodite, marries a rich petro-dollar Arab king, and subsequently gives birth to a baby boy. The presence of such fantasmic hermaphrodite characters in popular *yaoi* works also suggests a subliminal narrative reflecting women’s subconscious desire to deviate from a principle of female sexuality defined as irreducibly under the power of the patriarchal-heterosexual correlation. This female inclination toward hybrid or multiple gender possibilities can be manifested in *yaoi dōjinshi* in very diverse ways, since this genre faces few marketing constraints. Thus, the most significant examples of unrestrained gender-parody (premised on subconsciously subversive female desires) in *yaoi* are seen in *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika* works, where such desires can be manifested to the fullest possible degree.

Although critics such as Sugiura Yumiko and Nishimura Mari may jump to the simplistic conclusion that the popularity of *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika dōjinshi* proves that these genres do not reflect women’s

subconscious desire to nullify their femininity, these critics disregard the fact that the fundamental premise of *yaoi* involves women's attempts to subvert any sort of monolithic textualization of femininity.¹⁰ While the thematic energy of *yaoi* discourse displayed in *yuri* and *nyotaika* does not entail complete appreciation of femininity per se, it is nevertheless associated with the female act of endless rewriting (or challenging) established female gender roles. In a conversation between Nobi Nobita (a *yaoi* critic/artist) and Saitō Tamaki, Nobi says: "I like the feminized male characters in *yaoi dōjinshi*. There is an established subgenre of *nyotaika*, in which the biologically feminized Shinji of *Evangelion* are frequently depicted. After all, it can perhaps be said that I like *shōjo* with penises."¹¹ To this, Saitō replies: "it sounds like *yaoi* fans' gender-twisting goes right to the limit, so that concepts of gender are twisted 360 degrees and consequently return to writers'/readers' original gender (that is, femininity)."¹² However, much of the vital force of *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika dōjinshi*'s gender-twisting derives precisely from this 360-degree rotation that is mediated by the addition of masculine features to the characters portrayed. This hybrid feminized gender, in which male characters are feminized through women's imaginative 360-degree gender-twisting, cannot be equated with *yaoi* writers'/readers' originally inscribed female gender, precisely because these feminized characters in *yaoi dōjinshi* now possess such hybrid gender attributes. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler says:

Gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities.¹³

In *yaoi dōjinshi*, Japanese women subconsciously attempt to produce narratives in which the female gender (or gender per se) is limitlessly parodied (or twisted) into an infinite variety of imaginative (and subversive) forms.

¹⁰ See Sugiura 2006 and Nishimura 2002 for further details.

¹¹ Nobi 2003, p. 299.

¹² Nobi 2003, pp. 299–300.

¹³ Butler 1990, p. 138.

A consideration of the discursive space of *yaoi/yuri* and *nyotaika dōjinshi* thus raises a number of complex and controversial questions with regard to gender formation and the socio-cultural criteria on which it is based. As we have seen, women's creation of gender-parody narratives may represent a way by which they can imaginatively sublimate their inscribed female gender (or gender per se). The formation of *yaoi dōjinshi* should therefore be explored further, especially in relation to its wider socio-gender context, precisely because *yaoi dōjinshi* also contains a variety of other gender-parody themes and subjects beyond those depicted in *yuri* and *nyotaika*. In this way, it may become possible to discern the elaboration of gender possibilities and begin to reach an understanding of their significance in modern (and postmodern) Japanese culture.

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