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Papers

Bishōnen - the Four Elements

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Within the realm of “women’s manga” research, BL manga are regarded as an important media of gender discourse. Even beyond manga studies, discussions of BL show an inclination to refer to examples from manga. With respect to the particular contribution of manga expression, in this paper I consider mainly visual aspects that facilitate a certain reading of bishōnen, such as: still/moving, visible/invisible, appearances/true meaning, juxtapositions on the picture plane as well as in the narrative, generic conventions (*seme/uke*), and readership.

In this paper, “BL (boys’ love) manga” will be used as an umbrella term for manga dealing with the theme of romanticized male-male relationships by mostly female writers, aimed at a mostly female audience from the beginning of the genre in the 1970s to the present day. However, the focus of this paper will be on professionally published manga and not on the *dōjinshi*, i.e. amateur manga productions. In this paper, the term “penis” will be utilized to refer to the graphically depicted or implied physiological phenomenon, while the term “phallus” will be used in connection to the psychoanalytical and gender studies context, as a signifier of the dominant position in patriarchal society.

Central to BL, whether in manga or other media, is the character of the *bishōnen* — however, since the 90s the importance of this image has been questioned. Some academics suggest that the *bishōnen* is only one type of BL character, and others insist that the *bishōnen* does not really exist after the 90s (Mizoguchi 2003:53). Quite a few characters became a staple to exemplify this term; probably the most frequently cited is Gilbert Cocteau from Takemiya Keiko’s *Kaze to ki no uta*.

Being one of the pioneers and masterpieces of the genre, *Kaze to ki no uta* offers

a variety of characters and plot developments as well as visual and narrative devices that helped to shape BL manga and which influence the specifics of the genre even today. This paper will address the merits of *Kaze to ki no uta* as an example of the BL genre and the diversity of *bishōnen* imagery. For further research on the theme, which will be developed in a forthcoming Master's thesis, prominent examples from various eras of the BL manga evolution will be chosen to exemplify the stability of certain staples and tropes of BL that developed the specific symbolically charged protagonist.

Kaze to ki no uta protagonist Gilbert has been used to define the *bishōnen* as a masquerading girl, a girl with a phallus, or a victimized beauty who suffers from attracting the gaze in his subjugated feminine position:

<...> the young men portrayed in *yaoi* manga [sic] are not real life young men but male bodies with the hearts of young women. We can see that these men are fundamentally the alter egos of young women from the fact that the dialogue and narrative settings are so very "*shōjo*-esque". (Fujimoto 2004: 85)

Thus Gilbert can serve as an example of how in the *bishōnen* discourse the emphasis has been placed more on "femininity" that allegedly recommends the *bishōnen* to the potential female reader, than on "masculinity". However, it is the mixture of socially stapled gender-behavior traits that create the specific androgyny of the *bishōnen*.

Moreover, the readers' identification is also not necessarily limited to "femininity." Nagaike Kazumi, for example, has demonstrated that the female reader has more than one possibility for identification and dissociation in BL narratives. Nagaike has questioned the assumption that the female reader automatically associates with the *uke* whose sexual position is passive and thus allegedly similar to the staple female experience.

However, if the discourse of identification with respect to *yaoi* is limited to consideration of female readers' specific form of identification with penetrated uke characters who play the more passive and "feminine" role – <...> – then this drastically narrows the scope of potential female sexual desires and fantasies that can come into play in *yaoi*. (Nagaike 2003: p. 87)

Nagaike suggests that it is precisely the multiplicity of choices, combined with the mutuality of gazes, that provides the female reader with a phallus, which is symbolized by a penis which is involved in various sexual acts. On the other hand, dissociation provides the female reader with another type of power position of the distanced spectator (Nagaike 2003: 85).

<...> the significance of identification is that it provides female readers with access to the phallus, symbolized as the power of sexual domination <...> (Nagaike 2003: 87)

<...> possibility of scopophilic dissociation (and consequent distance) from male characters (and from patriarchal reality of sexuality itself) by which women can control the balance of subjective sexual repression. (Nagaike 2003: 86)

However, the mutuality of the gaze and the mutuality of penile pleasures may also be interpreted as an escape from the paradigm of phallic power. In BL, the penis does not necessarily signify a socially superior position in relation, for example, to a subjugated (“female”) other, but serves as a tool for mutual pleasure, suggesting the reversibility of the sexual roles, and the instability of the power relations in general. By discarding the phallus, fluctuating choices for association and dissociation occur and provide the reader with the possibility to read the gender stereotypes subversively, and to consciously reevaluate her own sexuality.

In the context of BL and BL manga, the *bishōnen* is actually a parody of both femininity and masculinity. He draws attention to the artificiality of the very notion of gender by means of juxtaposed stereotypical gender traits that represent androgyny through multiple “gender variations”, for example: a feminine-looking face combined with manly demeanor, a manly face with feminine demeanor, a feminine face and feminine behavior of a character which is defined as male through the depiction of a male-sexed body and penile pleasures. These narrative tropes highlight not only the discrepancy between a sexed body and gender traits, but they also deconstruct the phallic authority which is ascribed to the bearer of a penis.

This paper will explore the elements that constitute the image of *bishōnen* in relation to manga as a media and the symbolic readings of these elements in the context of BL and BL manga respectively, which facilitate the possibility of using the term “*bishōnen*” to denote the BL protagonist in general. Thus, defining the *bishōnen*

as a non-phallic male, a multifaceted image that relies on non-phallic androgyny assembled through juxtapositions of four representational key elements:

- **youth**
- **beauty**
- **same-sex relationship**
- **objectified penis**

1. Youth

(a) In order to transcend patriarchy by means of lacking a phallus, the male character has to be young, or more precisely, adolescent.

Greer refers to the adolescent male as not having a phallus, but a responsive penis, a tool for his and his partner's pleasure. He is also an object of the female gaze, as he has no phallic dominance over the female viewer yet. The transitional nature of adolescence gives him the socially sanctioned freedom to attract and enjoy attention (Greer 2001: 7, 228).

The boy is the missing term in the discussion of the possibility of a female gaze. <...> As a junior the boy must defer to his male elders and superiors and may not legitimately assert mastery over anyone.

<...> To put it another way, biological maleness only takes to itself phallic activity and mastery when it assumes patriarchal power. The boy, being debarred from phallic power, is endowed simply with a responsive penis rather than a dominating phallus and can be sexualized with impunity. (Greer 2001: 7)

One of the most popular examples of *bishōnen* is Gilbert Cocteau, 14 at the beginning of *Kaze to ki no uta* and 16 when he dies at the end. He is at the point when conscious sexuality awakens, but the body is yet devoid of the disruptive signs of maturity. In still images, his visual appeal is based on feminized looks, but in pictorial sequences, speed lines and panel layout reestablish his body language as that of boy, who is free and confident with his nakedness.

(b) Not only adolescent boys, but also certain occupational outcasts were historically constructed as “young”.

For example, in the Edo period, with the help of patterns of gender-ambiguous behavior, certain individuals transcended socially established age boundaries. Their

occupations, such as prostitutes or *onnagata* actors, depended on manipulating the gaze of the spectator, which was attracted through utilizing “youth” patterns and relinquishing phallic authority. As non-phallic “youth” they were placed outside of patriarchy, and this socially subordinate position was frequently accompanied by a subordinate sexual position.

At present, certain social occupations that rely on the manipulation of the gaze of the spectator, such as various types of performers, sex-industry workers, etc, are frequently perceived as being of a separate cast from society in general. Popular performers conceal their real age and sometimes even adopt certain behavior which references the eternal youth of supernatural beings. Examples can be readily found in the pop/rock music scene with performers such as *Gackt* or *L'arc~En~Ciel's* vocalist Hyde (whose current duet project is entitled *Vamps*), who are renowned for this type of stage persona.

If we refer to *Kaze to ki no uta*, a vivid example is Auguste Beau, Gilbert's father, a rich aristocrat in his 30s and a ruthless rapist, who exploits his son for his own ends. Auguste might appear the incarnation of phallic authority. However, not only is Auguste introduced in retrospect as being sexually abused in his adolescence, his “youth” is also recreated in his lifestyle as a poet and self-proclaimed outcast, secluded from patriarchal society in a dream-palace, refusing to deal with the responsibilities of his class and age. Mistreating his son is one of the “artistic” attempts to escape society and common sense.

2. Beauty

Beauty is the requirement in deconstructing the phallus through manipulation of the gaze. Its perception by manga readers is triggered through various means: visual, verbal, and narrative ones. Initially, beauty is supposed to be passively appealing to the gaze of the phallic spectator. However, in BL, reversible couples, or couples with unstable power- relations such as Serge and Gilbert, occupy center stage and defy the binary power paradigm of seeing/being seen through mutual gazing.

Assumptions about the bishōnen being the masquerading girl or the female reader's phallic alter ego in manga are mostly supported by androgynous images which follow certain beauty standards of the female body. However, there are more options for the representation of androgyny. Already around the 1980s, authors like BELNE utilized very masculine bodies and definitely appealing, but not necessarily

feminine, faces, creating androgyny through the juxtaposition of visual patterns of masculinity with cross-dressing and other gender-subversive practices. It shouldn't come as a surprise that her characters are young outcasts of the social system, such as rock stars and prostitutes.

Yet, the critical focus on beauty's faculty of passively attracting the gaze has also resulted in equating the *bishōnen* with the *uke*. Fujimoto, for example, argues that the *uke* suffers from attracting the gaze (Fujimoto 2003: 85).

On the other hand, Ishida Minori has suggested that the *uke* may become the most important character in the narrative, due to his ability to manipulate the gaze. Then, the gazed-upon character reduces the gazing character to a mere tool of his own story (Ishida 2007: 94-96). In *Kaze to ki no uta*, for instance, Gilbert is refused his own voice, but he is narrated through several *seme* characters who gaze upon him, and whose only *raison d'être* is to tell his story.

In BL the *seme's* beauty also plays a crucial part in narrative. Auguste, for example, is constructed through feminine traits, presupposing that the gaze of the *uke* would appreciate his beauty. But this beauty also serves another purpose. Through catering to the gaze of the *uke*, the *seme's* beauty allows for the possible redemption of violence.

Comparing the sequences of 1. Gilbert being raped for the first time by Bonnaire, and 2. Gilbert being raped afterwards by Auguste, illuminates the following.

Although in later volumes Bonnaire's character serves as a father figure for Gilbert, his initial rape is clearly a traumatic experience for Gilbert, which is not embellished or excused in any way; even the panel layouts remain very laconic and devoid of flowers or other decorations. On the other hand, the rape scene with Auguste, being aesthetically embellished, allows the imagery to transcend the initial horror of the rape and mesmerizes the viewer through decorative elements in page layouts as well as the beauty of both characters. Later, the gaze shifts to Gilbert's point of view, as the boy becomes active, initiating sexual intercourse. Thus, the reader learns that Auguste is the loser in this power-play, even if he maintains his position of the penetrator/*seme*. Similar patterns can be observed with other *Kaze to ki no uta* characters: Blaugh and several upper classmates who mistreat Gilbert are depicted as unattractive and banally cruel, yet Rosmarine's violence is apparently

rooted in sexual trauma and therefore excused.

One might suggest with a certain degree of certainty that in most titles, both protagonists are constructed as attractive, no matter if they are divided into the *seme* and the *uke* or form a reversible couple, even if patterns of attraction are diverse and cater to various tastes. Thus, they offer a variety of choices for the reader, who may associate with them or objectify them for her own pleasure.

3. Same-sex relationship

Characters in BL are *per definitionem* interested in same-sex relationships.

The same-sex relationship trope signifies various messages of BL:

- that true perfect love does not depend on procreative needs
- gender non-discriminative/equal relationship
- free choice of gender role
- no pollution of the body, like unexpected pregnancies and menstruation

Different types of same-sex relationship are represented in BL

- based on hetero-normative stereotypes: sexual behavior corresponds to the power relations of the couple
- juxtaposed power relationship: sexual behavior and the power relationship are compromised
- sexual positions are defined, but the power-balance is equal
- reversible couples, equal in sexual and spiritual aspects of the relationship

According to Judith Butler, the same-sex couple, even when acting out gender stereotypes, parodies these very stereotypes, and reveals the artificiality of gender, as both partners are allowed an active choice in gender identity as well as the freedom of altering it. When procreative needs are absent, the sexed body can discard the gender-stereotypical behavior, which is initially ascribed to it by a patriarchal society.

The *seme* may appear to have phallic authority. However, the *seme* is part of a same-sex relationship which removes the protagonists not only from the phallic agenda of procreation but also from the control over the maternal body that protects the father-son heredity. The power that the *seme* exercises might serve various purposes. But in the context of BL, his sexual dominance does not establish a patriarchal power position. Neither is the *uke's* position purely passive. The outdated patriarchal idea of being penetrated = passive is undermined by the

freedom of the *uke* to actively seek sexual intercourse with a freely chosen partner and to enjoy all aspects of it, including the recurring fixation on penile pleasures. In addition, the roles may be reversed as both partners possess the penises' penetrative function.

For example, Auguste's rapes are not an attempt to reclaim his social status. Rather, he behaves like a rape victim, struggling to reestablish his self-esteem and control over his own body. Gilbert, on the other hand, chooses and objectifies his lovers, seducing them, even if his sexual preferences are that of an *uke*. In Gilbert's relationship with Serge, we assume that Gilbert is the *uke*, but the structure of their relationship begins with Gilbert initiating sexual contact.

4. Objectified penis

There are several ways to represent the penis in BL manga:

- graphic depiction of both partners' penises
- *seme's* penis graphically depicted, *uke's* more implied
- hidden by body parts
- afterwards edited with intrusive censure
- "the empty hand" – penis implied by various manipulations of it, while being graphically absent.

The *bishōnen's* sexed body is always constructed as male. He has a penis that is variously explored and usually heavily beautified, turning it into the object of the female reader's exploitative gaze. Moreover, sometimes the penis is the only conventionally male part of the *bishōnen* image, undermining the patriarchal compulsory relation between sexed body and gender-adequate behavior.

But more importantly, in BL attention is being drawn to both partners having a penis, and thus the possibility of mutual penetration. This shifts the power-related issues from a patriarchal context to the contemplation of human relationships and the possibility or impossibility of achieving equality. In addition to the masculinity of the characters, most depictions of sexual intercourse, even the famous "rape-for-love" scenes, emphasize that there is reciprocal penile pleasure, renouncing the brutality of the act and objectifying the penis. Furthermore, the *seme* is frequently depicted pleasuring the *uke's* penis with his mouth, while his own needs are postponed or neglected. He is catering to the *uke's* pleasures.

Takemiya Keiko is famous for artistically hiding the penis of her characters in

Kaze to ki no uta. However, this incessant concealment results in attracting even more attention, especially in tandem with other visual and narrative tropes that assert penile pleasures. The penis is objectified as a tool to access pleasures; the penises' objectified position also implies the possibility of addressing the instability of power-relationships when it is distanced from the gender-binarity, forced onto a sexed body in the context of compulsory procreation.

In conclusion, the *bishōnen* may be used as an umbrella term for the symbolically charged protagonist of BL manga and BL in general, constructed through the juxtaposition and exploitation of elements of youth, beauty, same-sex relationship and objectifying the penis, which offers the female reader an escape from the patriarchal power paradigm and a possibility to access a position of empowering agency in relation to her own sexuality and the notion of gender.

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