He-Romance for Her – Yaoi, BL and Shounen-ai

Tuuli Bollmann
University of Helsinki

Introduction

In Japanese animated TV series, the year 2008 brought along the third season of a series where the main character, a teenaged boy, is engaged to another teenaged boy. Two seasons of a series focusing on the relationships of three different male couples also hit the air. Not to mention the uncounted number of series with subtexts of a similar nature. These themes are not dwelled on in order to appeal to sexual minorities, but rather to draw in a female audience. It is also not only limited to television animations; comics, CDs, novels and even merchandise are sold to women with the theme of two men in love.

This paper will outline the history of this phenomenon from its birth up to the current situation by first going over the development of the commercial side and then discussing the amateur side of the phenomenon. The aim is to offer a comprehensive picture of what this phenomenon is, and what its place is in the context of Japanese comics and animation. This paper will focus on printed media and commercial animated material, thus excluding online manifestations of the genre, sound-based products such as CD dramas, merchandise goods and video games.

Since most of the terminology is borrowed from the Japanese language, and does not yet have an established exact definition in the context of the English language, it is necessary to clarify the meanings of certain important terms as they will be used in this paper. This is to ensure a consensus between the writer and the reader and also to avoid the on-going controversy on how these terms should be used, which terms should be used, and what they mean exactly.

In this paper, *manga* will be used to refer exclusively to comics made in Japan by the Japanese. The counterpart of manga, *anime*, is a bit more difficult to define. This is because the outsourcing of the animation to other Asian countries as well as the financial input and influence of the US market need to be taken into consideration. There have been cases of US broadcasting companies influencing anime productions. To acknowledge these realities, an animation will be classified as anime, if the main production figures, such as character designers and story writers, are Japanese.

Moving on to the more specific terminology essential for the coherence of this paper, the term chosen to describe material targeted towards girls that portrays romantic feelings between two or more men is *shounen-ai*. This term is no longer used in Japan, and some western sources deem it archaic for that reason. However, I feel that using *BL*, the Japanese term that currently covers both sexual and non-sexual material involving romance between men (shortened from "Boys' Love" or "Boy's Love"), is too easily confused with "Boy Love" which in the context of English refers to a real-life attraction to young boys.

The term chosen to cover the material targeted towards a female audience that depicts two or more men having sex with each other will be referred to as *yaoi*, which in English is sometimes used to cover all the material here defined as shounen-ai. The term yaoi is an acronym of the Japanese phrase "Yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi" which roughly translates as "No climax, no point, no meaning" and was originally used to describe stories

that featured only sex with no real plot. Because yaoi is so closely and specifically connected to sexually explicit material, I feel it would be ill-suited to describe the whole genre. It is also useful for the purposes of this paper to separate a term for referring to the material that specifically portrays sex. Thus yaoi with its close association to a sexual context will be limited to describing only material with a sexual content.

This use of terminology makes shounen-ai the umbrella term under which yaoi falls, and the separating factor is the portrayal of sexual intercourse between two or more men. Shounen-ai material can hint at sex having happened, but the actual act is not shown beyond kissing and possible undressing.

To refer to material that involves young boys in sexual situations, the term *shota* will be used. This does not simply refer to boys younger than the legal age of maturity, which in Japan is 20 years of age according to Interpol (2007). It is also not directly related to the age of consent, which Interpol lists to be 13 years of age in Japan nationwide (2007). The concept of shota is not as clear-cut as simply being understood to cover under-aged males in terms of age of maturity or age of consent, but rather meaning pre-teen and younger or early-teenage and younger boys, depending on the definer. For this paper, the chosen age limit of shota is set at 15 years of age. This age is chosen in order to include material such as the *Papa to Kiss in the Dark* anime, in which the main character, a 14-year-old boy who is involved with an adult man, refers to his own situation as being shota. In this paper, shota will be used as a subcategory of yaoi, thus ruling out all heterosexual shota material.

A note should also be made that in this paper, the Japanese names will be given in their Japanese form, that is, with the last name first, followed by the first name. An exception to this is the list of sources, where Japanese names will be treated in the same way as Western ones.

While the rising popularity of Japanese popular culture world wide has increased the number of consumers of shounen-ai outside Japan as well, not much has been written about the genre in English. Most commonly, it is mentioned as a subgenre of shoujo manga, comics for girls, which while being the correct context, does not give much space for a more in-depth look. In terms of academic writing on shounen-ai, Japanese research on the subject appears to be in a similar situation as its English-language counterpart; shounen-ai is not completely void of academic attention, but there is considerably more room for research, analysis and discussion on the topic. Mark McLelland, one of the more productive academic writers on shounen-ai in English, accounts this to the reluctance of the academia in Japan to take both sexuality and popular culture seriously, particularly when concerning women (2000, 61).

If there is not much research on shounen-ai manga, even less seems to be written concerning shounen-ai anime. Because the two different media are so intimately intertwined, it would seem not only reasonable but also potentially enlightening to address both anime and manga side by side. Due to the scarce amount of information available on shounen-ai anime, the majority of the information presented here on the subject is based solely on my own research.

Beautiful Boys in Boarding Schools

Shounen-ai, as a sub-genre of shoujo manga is targeted towards a female audience and it is also mainly produced by female authors and artists. The connection it has to women specifically becomes quite clear when taking a look at the history of this phenomenon, starting from its birth.

Manga, in its contemporary form, emerged during the immediate post World War II years. Almost all the other early manga artists were men, with only a couple of female artists being able to make it into the business before the manga boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Gravett 2004, 78; Thorn 2001). A testament to shounen-ai as a genre specifically made by women for women is how its birth coincides with the time when female artists were able to break into the business and start writing stories they felt would interest girls. Only very few of the stories were shounen-ai, of course, but the genre did get introduced soon after women started to break into the industry in greater numbers. The very first shounen-ai story called *Sanruumo ni te* (In the Sunroom) and written by female manga author Takemiya Keiko was published in 1970 (Thorn 2005). A year later, another female artist, Hagio Moto, published another short shounen-ai story, *Juuichi-gatsu no gimunajiumu* (November Gymnasium), which is also often cited as the first commercially published shounen-ai. In 1974, Hagio Moto also created the first volume-length shounen-ai story called *Touma no Shinjou* (Heart of Thomas), but the first real commercially successful shounen-ai was Takemiya Keiko's ground-breaking *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (Song of the Wind and Trees/ Poem of Wind and Tree), a story that ran for 17 volumes starting in 1976.

All of the early shounen-ai series share some thematic similarities. The stories took place in a foreign setting, most commonly at some European boarding school, and the main characters were boys in their teens. Dramatic

turns and a tragic end were also featured in these works. Themes such as rape and paedophilia were present in both *Touma no Shinjo* and *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, with *Kaze to Ki no Uta* also introducing incest, under-aged prostitution, and drug use into the story. However, it should be noted that despite the dark themes and tragic fates of the boys, the stories also portrayed the actual love between the two main characters as something quite pure, perhaps partly to create a contrast to the darker and dirtier themes. Even in *Kaze to Ki no Uta* where the main characters Serge and Gilbert, both teenage boys, end up consummating their love, the relationship of the boys is portrayed as the purest thing in the story. This is important to take into account to avoid assuming, mistakenly, that the stories with shounen-ai only used the same sex attraction to describe abuse and other dark themes.

Due to the success of the early shounen-ai manga, mainly *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, a bi-monthly magazine titled *June* was launched by Sunpublishing in 1978. It turned into a success big enough to be accompanied, only four years later, by *Shousetsu June*, which was a magazine for illustrated shounen-ai novels (Schodt 2002, 120).

Expanding into New Forms and Settings

During the 1980s, as can be seen from the launch of the *Shousetsu June*, shounen-ai kept on developing and finding new forms. In terms of manga, the 1980s brought shounen-ai from the European boarding schools of past centuries into more contemporary settings as well, including modern Japan (Lunsing 2006, 7). Some of the stories gained an amount of social realism, introducing themes such as prejudice against homosexuals, as well as the pressures society puts on the protagonists to force them into a productive heterosexual marriage (Lunsing 2006, 7-8). This is not to say that the whole genre changed, as stories more prone towards fantasy still held their ground as well.

An important milestone in the history of shounen-ai also took place during the 1980s: the expansion into animated media. What exactly was the first shounen-ai anime is debatable, depending on how central a role shounen-ai is required to have in the story for the anime to be considered to belong to the genre. For example, McCarthy and Clements name *Patalliro* from 1982 as the first shounen-ai themed television anime (1999, 34), but the shounen-ai element existed only between two supporting characters. An unarguable breakthrough into anime happened in 1987 with the anime adaptation of *Kaze to Ki no Uta* called *Sanctus*. Even if not necessarily the very first shounen-ai anime, *Kaze to Ki no Uta: Sanctus* was at the very least the first yaoi anime to be released. Much like all the yaoi anime up until very recently, *Kaze to Ki no Uta: Sanctus* was an OVA, original video animation, which means it did not air on television but was released straight to video. Only two years later, the first part of the *Earthian* OVA was released, and while the first part does not have yaoi, it is shounen-ai and the story does develop into yaoi by the third instalment. The yaoi and shounen-ai anime OVA production continued throughout the 1990s with a fairly steady output. The majority of the stories turned into anime were based on manga or novels.

After the 1980s economic bubble had burst, manga sales went up during the beginning of the 1990s (Thorn 2001). In 1995, the circulation of *June* was between 80,000 and 100,000 (Honkawa Data Tribute 2007; Schodt 2002, 120-123). *June* had also been joined by many other shounen-ai themed magazines, the most famous being *BexBoy* by Biblos, which was accompanied by *Genkkan Shousetsu BexBoy*, a magazine for illustrated novels, and bi-monthly *BexBoy GOLD* (McLelland 2006). Both *June* and *BexBoy*, the latter now published by Libre, are still being published, along with an uncounted number of other shounen-ai and yaoi specific magazines.

The New Millenium

Possibly the biggest change in the development of shounen-ai manga in the 2000s is the interest the western markets started showing the genre. An American manga publisher, Tokyopop, licensed a yaoi series, *FAKE* by Matoh Sanami, and published a translated version in 2003. In 2004, the first yaoi specific publisher, Be Beautiful, published their first three licensed and translated titles. From then on, many publishers have seen commercial potential in shounen-ai and the number of licensed and published titles has risen rapidly in just a few years. This interest from outside of Japan is starting to slowly influence the shounen-ai produced in Japan, with Digital Manga Publishing being the first to bring out a Japanese yaoi title, *L'Étoile Solitaire*, that was specifically produced for the English market in 2007.

On the anime front, the new decade has witnessed shounen-ai confirm its place in TV animation with more than half a dozen shounen-ai series of varying lengths having been aired. With new technology, OVAs have been replaced by ODAs, Original DVD Animations. Regardless of the technological changes, this format has

remained the main publishing method for yaoi anime. Both types of shounen-ai anime, TV series and ODAs, are still mainly based on other previous works such as manga, novels and, as a new addition, yaoi computer games. Perhaps due to shounen-ai getting more exposure as TV anime, the OVAs and ODAs have concentrated mainly on the more graphic yaoi as opposed to some of the very soft and non-pornographic shounen-ai anime titles of the 1990s.

Since *Kaze to Ki no Uta*, shota has been rather absent from animated yaoi, which is understandable when taking into account the limited number of shounen-ai anime altogether and seeing how shota is only one part of the genre. Still, the long absence makes it all the more interesting that in the 2000s, three new shota anime have been released. Among these shota titles, the Pico series stands out in a rather peculiar way: it seems to be targeted also towards the male audience. The series follows the sexual encounters of the main character, Pico, who is a young, very feminine boy who ends up in a dress at least once per each instalment. There are several indications of the attempt to also attract male viewers, such as a female masturbation scene in the second story, and the optional voice track on the first DVD which has the lines of the adult male protagonist removed so that only Pico's voice remains. Even if this material may sound too fetishist to have a large target audience, the series reached its third instalment recently, which indicates it has found a large enough audience to make it commercially profitable. However, it remains to be seen whether or not these types of yaoi products, aimed for both a female and male audience, become a more lasting phenomenon.

Non-Commercial Publications

Neither the history nor the present of shounen-ai rests only on the commercial side of publishing. Doujinshi, self-published comics and novels, have played an important role in terms of the development of shounen-ai and still form a large part of the genre. The beginning of the doujinshi phenomenon takes place during the 1970s, when photocopying became more widely available and printing costs began to be affordable, offering new kinds of possibilities for individuals to print and distribute their own manga and novels (Kinsella 2000, 104-105). Unlike commercial manga, where manga targeted towards boys and men is far more popular than shoujo manga, the majority of the people participating in doujinshi events are women (Kinsella 2000, 112; McLelland 2006; Schodt 2002, 40). Not all of doujinshi by women or for women are shounen-ai, of course, but it is the dominant genre of the doujinshi field (Kinsella 2000, 113-117).

The doujinshi phenomenon has affected mainstream manga over the years and many famous manga artists have begun their career by making doujinshi (Kinsella 2000, 109). Especially during the 1980s, the manga industry was keeping its eyes open for promising doujinshi artists, but this practice became less prominent in the 1990s (Kinsella 2000, 109). However, many shounen-ai artists still start out with doujinshi. An excellent example of this is Nakamura Shungiku, who began her series *Junjou Romantica* as doujinshi work. It was then picked up and commercially published by Kadokawa Publishing in 2003. Parts of the story were also adapted into a CD Drama and in April 2008, an anime based on the manga started its television run in Japan. It was followed by a second season in the fall. *Junjou Romantica* is a noteworthy title also because it is the first clearly yaoi anime to air on TV. Of course, most shounen-ai titles do not become popular enough to have an anime adaptation. It is not rare for professional shounen-ai artists to first be doing doujinshi and then getting it licensed by a commercial publisher.

The other aspect that shows the close link between commercial shounen-ai and the doujinshi scene is the fan or parody doujinshi, which gained popularity during the 1980s. The word "parody" does not really carry the same nuances in this case as it usually does in English, which is why fan doujinshi is probably more descriptive of what the phenomenon is about: fan-made works of a series the artist does not have the copyrights for. In the 1980s, female artists began producing such doujinshi of the shounen-ai variety of popular shounen, boys', series (Kinsella 2000, 113; McLelland 2006, Thorn 2004). The fans would take characters from a show they liked and portray these characters involved in homosexual romantic situations. Many commercially published shounen-ai artists continue to produce this type of doujinshi alongside their professional careers. Some shounen-ai artists also make fan doujinshi of their own commercially published series, possibly including more graphic or fetishist material in the doujinshi than in the official series, as in Yoshinaga Fumi's *Antique Bakery* doujinshi and Murakami Maki's *Gravitation* doujinshi. Sometimes the artists also use the doujinshi format simply because they wish to tell a story that contradicts the story of the official series, as in Sadahiro Mika's *Under Grand Hotel* doujinshi.

Conclusions

With over 30 years of history, shounen-ai has definitely proven that there is an audience for it. Although being part of shoujo manga, it has its own distinctive features that set it sufficiently apart from shoujo to make it possible and reasonable to give it attention on its own merits. All the different forms shounen-ai has manifested over the years show that it is not as homogenous a genre as it often is written off as. The stories range from subtle love stories that might not even feature a kiss to fully graphic depictions of sexual intercourse, with an abundance of different settings and types of characters featured. Shounen-ai is much more than simply yaoi, covering everything in between the two aforementioned extremes. Denying or overlooking either type gives a warped, or at the very least incomplete, image of the genre. Given the current amount of academic attention paid to shounen-ai, it seems like only the very surface has been scratched when it comes to the opportunities this genre has to offer for example in the field of gender and sexuality studies.

Shounen-ai is by no means threatening to become the norm of shoujo manga. It should be noted, however, that the dominance of shounen-ai in terms of doujinshi indicates the possibility that those women who are interested in anime and manga beyond the occasional title, lean towards shounen-ai in their preferences. Japanese markets are also starting to see the potential of this group as consumers, if the number of shounen-ai anime currently in circulation is anything to go by. With the new developments in Japan, and the popularity spreading beyond the borders of the country, this particular genre offers a wealth of material for closer looks from various perspectives. What is certain is that there is something in these stories of homosexual attraction between two men that interests female audiences today just as much as it did in the 1970s.

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