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**Men on the market:**

**Feminist analysis of age-stratified male-male romance in *Boys' Love* manga**

Anna Madill, PhD., School of Psychological Sciences, University of Leeds, UK

a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk

Email: a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk

Tele: +(44)1133435750

### Abstract

Male-male sexuality is the central trope of *Boys' Love* (BL) manga with stories tending to revolve around a central uke-seme ('bottom'-'top') pair. Although focused on men, BL is produced and consumed primarily by women. This article presents an analysis of age-stratified male-male romance – pederasty - as portrayed in BL. My corpus consists of 234 original Japanese BL manga stories, created by 100 different mangaka (author-artists), published commercially in English between 2003 and 2012. Sixty-eight (30%) of these stories were identified as involving age-stratified relationship, eight of which were selected for detailed analysis. Seven were selected for typicality: *Waru* (2007) by Yukari Hashida deemed the most typical, and *Fangs* (2008) by Hiroki Kusumoto included in analysis as the most atypical age-stratified story in order to test the robustness of identified patterns. I argue that that the characteristic themes of age-stratified BL map surprising well onto the eroticised intra-familial dynamics of Freud and the intra- and inter-familial economics of Lévi-Strauss as theorised by Rubin (1975). The patterns identified are evidenced and discussed under the following headings: the mother identified son, the doubly-divested man, the castrated father, men on the market, and the phallic mother. These themes help build and substantiate my argument that age-stratified BL might work as a feminist critique of patriarchy through the mechanism of phallic divestiture.

**Keywords:** boys love, feminism, homosexuality, manga, psychoanalysis, yaoi.

## **Men on the market:**

### **Feminist analysis of age-stratified male-male romance in *Boys' Love* manga**

Male-male sexuality<sup>1</sup> is the central trope of *Boys' Love*<sup>2</sup> (BL) manga and its formula of uke ('bottom') and seme ('top') so secure that it can be, at times, playfully subverted in reversible couples. Although focused on men, BL is produced and consumed primarily by women. Surveys in the West suggest that 78%-89% of the audience is female and the figure is expected to be even higher in Japan (Madill in press; Pagliassotti 2008). In this article I analyse age-stratified male-male romance – pederasty - as portrayed in BL. Pederasty can be defined as sexual contact between a man in his early 20s or younger - usually much younger - and an adult male who is at least 5 years older (Rind 2013). Pederasty is illegal in most contemporary societies although has a long, if not uncontroversial, history in many cultures. I am analysing age-stratified romance because erotic manga with young(-looking) characters is vulnerable to English Prohibited Images of Children legislation (Coroners and Justice Act 2009<sup>3</sup>). Arguably, this legislation has a problematically wide reach (Madill 2015) and Zanghellini (2009) and McClelland (2012) have explored the possibly devastating implications of 'child abuse materials' laws for BL in Australia and beyond (McClelland 2015).

With little research specifically on the topic, I was interested to understand how age-stratified male-male romance is represented in BL. However, shotacon manga, which focuses on pre-adolescent boys in sexual contexts and is uncontrovertibly illegal in many jurisdictions, is excluded and is usually thought a distinct genre to BL although there are overlaps. For example, Frennea (2011) surveyed BL readers (number of participant=476) with regard to their reaction to 'shota' elements in yaoi – another term for BL. She reports

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<sup>1</sup> Often symbolised by the rose in Japanese manga, light illustrated novels, and specialist magazines

<sup>2</sup> An umbrella term for a cluster of genres including yaoi, shonen-ai, and sometimes male-male shotacon

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p\\_to\\_r/prohibited\\_images\\_of\\_children/](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p_to_r/prohibited_images_of_children/)

27% agreement with the statement that ‘shota in yaoi makes me feel uncomfortable’ and a 43% endorsement to liking ‘teenage boys, but not kids in yaoi’. On the other hand, 14.5% endorsed the option ‘I am aroused by/love shota in yaoi’, 3% agreed that they ‘will not read/watch a story without shota’, and 5% ‘do not have a problem with shota/child pornography in real life’. With an interim 2180 participants, the results of my own on-going survey of BL fandom<sup>4</sup> are that 38% of respondents particularly enjoy pederastic relationships in BL and 34% particularly enjoy representation of underage sex in BL when both partners are underage. However, scholarship and available evidence is consistent in the conclusion that a gulf exists between fans’ engagement with erotic manga, such as BL, and their real life sexual behaviour (e.g., Saitō 2007).

I will argue that the characteristic themes of age-stratified BL map surprising well onto the eroticised intra-familial dynamics of Freud and the intra- and inter-familial economics of Lévi-Strauss. Specifically, I use feminist interpretations of both theories to provide an understanding of ways in which age-stratified BL may work as a critique of patriarchy. This observation is not new (e.g., Aoyama 1988; Midori 1993; Welker 2006), but my focus on age-stratified BL and methodological procedure are novel. The article commences with an exploration of the intersection between psychoanalysis and patriarchal structures, particularly as theorised by Rubin (1975). This is followed by a description of how I selected the eight age-stratified BL stories for consideration. I then describe and analysis the themes identified in common between these stories before ending with conclusions.

### **Exchange in women and the oedipal triangle**

The precision of the fit between Freud and Lévi-Strauss is striking. Kinship systems require a division of the sexes. The Oedipal phase divides the sexes. Kinship systems include sets of rules governing sexuality. The Oedipal crisis is the assimilation of these rules and taboos. Compulsory heterosexuality is the product of kinship. The Oedipal phase constitutes heterosexual desire. Kinship rests on a

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<sup>4</sup> <https://leeds.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/blfandomsurvey>

radical difference between the rights of men and women. The Oedipal complex confers male rights upon the boy and forces the girl to accommodate herself to her lesser rights.

Gayle Rubin (1975: 57)

Figure 1 describes in abstract form the kinship structures through which male privilege is maintained in patriarchy (Lévi-Strauss 1947). Power passes from father to son in a line of descent. This power passes through the reproductive capacity of the mother—her use value—conferring on her no similar privileges. The son acquires a wife in the same way that his sister is given to a man outside the family by her father—her exchange value—through which an inter-family alliance is secured between the men of the two families. This power passes through the daughter, conferring on her no similar benefits or rights, even in herself.

Fig 1.

All societies have a system of managing reproductive arrangements and all known systems are gender-stratified to the apparent detriment of females, although some non-modern societies are not strictly patriarchal (Rubin 1975).

Structural forms have flexible shape and women can cultivate pockets of influence even when patriarchal contours are relatively firm. Moreover, patriarchy empowers some men at the expense of others, for example the disinheritance, when strictly adhered to, of additional and illegitimate sons. However, although huge progress has been made in many societies towards greater egalitarianism, the structure described by Lévi-Strauss casts a long shadow. This is can be seen in the continuing inequalities in domestic work (which has only use value, Kuhn 1978) between the sexes even when wives are in paid employment, the ritual of the father giving away the bride and her subsequent change of name, and, a key element of the following analysis, the continuing primacy of bonds between men.

As identified by Rubin (1975), Lévi-Strauss's kinship scheme is compatible with Freud's account of the intra-familial process of gender and sexual accommodation—the Oedipus complex—with the triangular relationship between father, mother, and child

appearing clearly in Figure 1. Of particular relevance is Lacan's interpretation of Oedipus as the crises in which the child apprehends the kinship system and the implications of her or his place within it: meaning, amongst other things, compulsory heterosexuality and girls' lower status. Challenging either of these outcomes is therefore a challenge to patriarchy although, importantly, each capitalises on different fracture lines. Feminist psychoanalytic theory argues that it is patriarchal structures that shape the intra-psychic dynamics of intra-familial gender identifications and desires, incompletely stabilised in most people and resentfully acceded to in many women.

A particularly useful concept in Lacanian theory is that of the phallus defined in his early work as a 'symbolic object' or 'set of meanings' constituting male privilege at the most abstract level. Paradoxically, the phallus is also the signifier par excellence of 'lack' given that it can in actuality never be possessed (Levy-Stokes 2001). The hard lines between men in Figure 1 can, psychoanalytically, be interpreted as the path along which the phallus is exchanged symbolically between men, a route which requires the mediation of a woman (dotted lines, and way in which the hard line passes through the daughter from father-in-law to son-in-law). The concept of the phallus de-naturalises the link between men and power because the bedrock of male entitlement, i.e., that the/having a penis is necessarily the same as the/having the phallus, is revealed to be false. And the lack that has been tied specifically to women—lack of a penis—is human frailty itself since the phallus is an 'empty' object. A particularly interesting repercussion of this for a feminist reading of BL is that genital sex between men can provide women leverage in challenging female disempowerment because 'once the penis...becomes merely a means to pleasure, pleasure among men, the phallus loses its power' (italic in the original, Irigaray 1977:193). This is, however, a risky strategy because it welds representations of one subjugated group to the cause of another and could be considered denigrating to gay men (Lunsing 2006). What I hope to show, though, is that this

strategy is exceptionally innovative and evocative and, from the perspective of women at least, incorporates a celebration of men ‘beyond the phallic pale’.

Both Irigaray (1977) and Sedgwick (1985) provide accounts of the primacy of bonds between men, the role of heterosexuality in serving these bonds, and the often destructive effect on women in triangular relationship with two men who are invested in her (e.g., rivals, father/brother and suitor). Sedgwick theorises male bonds as existing on an historically-, culturally-, and class-bound continuum of homosocial desire in which genital sexual activity constitutes only one extreme. In feminist psychoanalytic theory, Irigaray points to this continuum obliquely using the slippage in French between ‘homo’ (same) and ‘homme’ (man): ‘Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women’ (1977: 172). My argument will be that BL makes devastating use of the male homosocial continuum as theorised by Sedgwick, undercutting men’s claim to the phallus though literalising what Irigaray elides.

### **Age-stratified Boys’ Love: An open display of pederastic love**

Consider the exemplary case of father-son relationships, which guarantee the transmission of patriarchal power and its laws, its discourse, its social structures. These relations, which are in effect everywhere, cannot be eradicated through the abolition of the family or of monogamous reproduction, nor can they openly display the pederastic love in which they are grounded. They cannot be put into practice at all, except in language, without provoking a general crisis, without bringing one sort of symbolic system to an end.

Luce Irigaray (1977: 193)

I selected eight texts for analysis from my collection of 234 original Japanese BL manga stories - defined as having one central uke-seme pair - created by 100 different mangaka (author-artists) published commercially in English between 2003 and 2012<sup>5</sup>. This reasonably large corpus was purchased on a relatively random basis but with an attempt to cover diverse types and styles. Sixty-eight (30%) were identified as involving age-stratified relationships as

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/5083990/Boys\\_Love\\_YAOI\\_manga\\_sample](https://www.academia.edu/5083990/Boys_Love_YAOI_manga_sample) funded a grant from the British Academy

defined by Rind (2013, see above). I have coded all 234 stories at content level (e.g., setting) and at interpretative level (e.g., uke femininity) using around 300 different codes generated through my familiarity with the genre. The programme Atlas-ti allowed me to store, manage, and conduct some analysis of my coding.

It would have been difficult pragmatically to conduct detailed analysis of all 68 stories. I therefore selected a sub-sample on the rationale that, if age-stratified BL partakes of a common *weltanschauung*, this should be discernible through the inspection of a moderate number of typical examples. From my coding patterns, I determined Waru to be the most typical age-stratified story overall, followed closely by *Dog of the Rununculous/ Everyone's Song* (related short stories) (2011), *Three Wolves Mountain* (2012), and *Endless Rain* (2008). I identified also for inclusion the short story *Fangs* as the least typical age-stratified story as a test of the robustness of my analytical interpretations. Finally, for additional breadth, I identified for inclusion the most typical age-stratified story from relevant BL sub-types.

- a. *Adventure of a Canary* (2005): gender-stratification sub-type in which one of the male partners is in a strongly feminine role.
- b. *Mr Tiger and Mr Wolf* (2009/2011): taboo in pederasty proper, uke-older-than-seme sub-type.
- c. *Just Around the Corner* (2008): the common BL sub-type of teacher-student relationships not otherwise represented in the selected typical texts.

I read all eight stories carefully several times paying attention to, and making notes on, narrative and visual content. It was at this point I decided that the intersection of psychoanalytic theory and structural anthropological accounts of patriarchy, particularly as theorised by Rubin (1975), was a good way to make sense of patterns I was identifying in the material. In the next section I discuss these patterns under the following headings: the mother identified son, the doubly-divested man, the castrated father, men on the market, and the

phallic mother. These themes help build and substantiate my argument that age-stratified BL might work as a feminist critique of patriarchy through the mechanism of phallic divestiture. This may be a complimentary, but not identical, process to that posited by Nagaike (2003) in which she suggests that '(t)he privileged position of the 'penis' in yaoi has to do with female desires (and fantasies) of assimilating phallic sexuality into a vaginal orientation' (90).

### **Phallic divestiture: A penis by any other name**

When men engage in genital sexuality together it positions them in tension with patriarchal masculinity, particularly the man who is sexually penetrated because this is strongly associated with the stigma of his being feminised. Committed, as opposed to transitory, male-male sexuality also presents a challenge to patriarchal forms through interrupting the lines of descent and alliance, however residually-symbolic in contemporary societies, and refuses the detour of actualising male bonds through women. And the response towards such men has been, and often remains, severe (Mader and Hekma 2013). In psychoanalytic terms, engaging in male-male genital sexuality is a - or at the very least risks - phallic divestiture which places men in the feminised realm of 'lack'. Women are tasked (with pretending) not to see men's lack, hence texts of explicit male-male sexuality created and consumed by women can be understood as a dephallicising, emasculating spectacle.

### **The mother-identified son**

A particularly phallically-divested figure is the effeminate homosexual man. Of interest here is the Freudian understanding of homosexuality in terms of the negative Oedipal constellation in which the boy is considered to retain his pre-Oedipal identification with his mother and to develop a desire to take her place in relation to men. The sexual receptivity of the mother-identified homosexual man resonates with the *uke's* role as an often explicitly effeminate younger man in age-stratified stories. In fact, in the stories selected as particularly typical, uke-mother identification is stressed both visually and narratively.

The uke's physical likeness to his mother is often astounding visually (Wolves) and remarked upon: 'she does resemble you' (Waru 2007: 66); 'you look just like Ryouko' (Rain 2008: 53); 'he's Tsuruko's living shadow' (Dog 2011: 38); 'you look just like your mother' (Tiger 2011: 78). Moreover, the uke and his mother are often substitutable within sexualised relationships (Rain, Tiger) including with the seme: 'I want you to imagine what it would be like if Yuushi were a woman' (Waru 2007: 78); 'you could always pretend it's her' (Dog 2011: 38). In Canary, the merger between the extremely feminised uke and his mother-figure is recoverable from fact that she owns him and, when he is not working for her, keeps him locked in a tower. No information about the *uke's* mother is given in Corner or Fangs. However, in Corner, the older uke is visually feminised and expresses the negative Oedipal wish to be looked after by an older man, and in Fangs the uke's mother identification might be inferred from his receptive role in relationship to the older seme.

#### The doubly-divested man

All uke-seme pairs in BL risk phallic divestiture through being in a sexual relationship with another man. However, strikingly, in all the age-stratified stories selected for detailed analysis, when the seme is (as is usual) the older partner, thereby retaining the relative status of age, he is made to suffer also a further divestiture. In Wolves the seme is further dephallicised through being penetrated by the uke: 'I'm embarrassed... why would a grown man want to be submissive and mounted by some kid?!' (p. 196). In Canary the seme is captured and kicked off a tower—the phallus—to his imminent death by the *uke's* mother-figure and has to be saved by the feminine uke. In Rain the particularly dominant seme appears to have been murdered—stabbed and, hence, penetrated by another man—returning at the end of the story in a feminised role as the *uke's* new secretary. Finally, in Fangs the seme is a tooth-pulling—self-castrating—vampire unable to stop killing despite his Christian faith: 'No matter how many times I pull out my fangs... they keep growing back' (p. 148).

A recognised trope of BL is of the heterosexual who has the one-off experience of falling in love with another man. If the mother-identified homosexual is a challenge to patriarchal masculinity, so much more the heterosexual man who renounces his privilege. This trope appears in both *Waru* and *Dog* in which both *seme*s appear to have a primary attraction to women. These two stories are particularly interesting because such a man could avoid divestiture, as is broached in *Waru*: *uke*—'So you like women better', *seme*—'Of course I do!' (p.78). In *Dog*, the *seme*'s heterosexuality is less fully established, but implied through his love for the *uke*'s dead mother, absence of other sexual relationships, and presentation as a masculine, middle-rank Yakuza (gangster). As if to secure full divestiture, both *seme*s are positioned within castrating Oedipal relationships with a father-figure. In *Waru*, the *seme*'s father treats him as an incompetent ne'er-do-well, tricks him into believing the *seme* – himself - is dying, facilitates the *seme*'s imprisonment, and returns him to the *uke* on a leash (p. 100). In *Dog*, the *seme* has capitulated into abject servility to his Yakuza clan leader who raped and married the *seme*'s paramour (former Yakuza leader and, hence, also mother-figure) who died soon after.

In *Tiger and Corner*, double-divestiture is enacted in relation to the *uke* because, not only is he in a homosexual relationship, he is the older, yet passive, partner. However, like the older *seme*s, this is achieved in two moves. In *Tiger* the older man is initially dominant and becomes sexually passive through accident in that the male 'tabby cat' he thought he had secured for a wife grows up to be a tiger-*seme*. In *Corner*, the older *uke*'s preference is for an older partner and he is ambivalent about his relationship with the younger *seme*: 'I'd be better off with an older man. Someone mature, with money. I should find someone who can take care of me.' (p. 170)

The castrated father

The mother-identified son and the doubly-divested man describe typical positioning of the uke and seme in age-stratified BL. However, commensurate with my identification of a cluster of codes around '*family hierarchy*', parental figures often are important in these stories. So, how are fathers portrayed in age-stratified BL? Silverman (1992) identifies an attempt to respond to the trauma of the Second World War in classic Hollywood cinema 'by effecting the male subject's identification with a castrated father and by eroticizing his compulsory repetition of unpleasure as masochism' (120-1). A similar mechanism can be identified in BL, and the father-figure in my selected age-stratified stories is very often dephallicised (see also Aoyama, 2013 on BL mangaka Fumi Yoshinaga).

The *seme*'s father-figure is mentioned in five of the eight stories, if God-the-Father is counted as such in *Fangs*, and in the three most typical he is an emasculated figure. In *Wolves*, the *seme*'s father was killed when he was a child and hence unable to protect him from harm arising as a consequence. And in *Rain* the *seme*'s beloved father-figure committed suicide due to business problems. In *Waru* he is cunning but ridiculous: a doctor who drives a stolen ambulance to beat the traffic but who has no driving license—a wonderful metaphor for unfounded entitlement—and who viciously assures the uke that homosexuality is an 'illness' while forced to confront his own homosexual desire – his own 'lack' - at the end of the book. Interestingly, in *Waru*, although they are in a highly antagonistic relationship, an explicit identification is made between the seme and his father through commented-upon physical likeness (p.66). This mirrors, although is not as common a trope as, the identification forged between uke and his mother (see above section, The mother-identified son) and is an excellent diagenetic example, as outlined by Silverman, of effecting the male subject's identification with a castrated father.

The *uke*'s father is mentioned in six of the eight stories and in all but *Canary*, in which he appears only within the word 'parent', he is pointedly an alpha male. However, in

four of the five stories in which his character is fleshed-out, he is emasculated during the course of the story. In Waru, although the *uke*'s father is a wealthy and influential politician he is physically and emotional fragile: 'Dad currently in hospital due to shock' (p. 54). In Wolves, the *uke*'s father is a mere human in a pack of werewolves and inept in comparison to his werewolf wife who bites his head—castrates him—when she is annoyed (p. 121). In Rain, the *uke*'s father is a powerful chief executive officer (CEO) who is, however, deposed by the *uke* in a take-over, and retired into cake-making domesticity. In Tiger the *uke*'s father is an animalistic 'monster' who may have murdered his wife, is often absent from the pack, and has abdicated leadership to his second son.

Interestingly in Waru, and the two stories in which the *seme*'s father is not emasculated (Tiger and Fangs), there is striking allusion to the apparatus of the gaze<sup>6</sup> (Mulvey 1975). The gaze is the abstract and, hence, unlocatable source of 'being looked at' which, nevertheless, sustains us as human subjects. An incredibly powerful representation of the source of the gaze is God (the *seme*'s father-figure in Fangs) who is everywhere, in whose eyes we are judged, and from whose eyes we cannot hide. The gaze is reified as male, meaning that women have less entitlement 'to look' (i.e., to define in their own terms), are instead 'looked at' (i.e., defined in the terms laid out by men), and, unsurprisingly then, found wanting: 'the male look both transfers its own lack to the female subject, and attempts to pass itself off as the gaze' (Silverman 1992: 144). In patriarchy, for reasons including those outlined in the introduction, this phallic gaze is also heterosexual 'thereby situating gay men, with women, decisively on the side of the spectacle' (354).

In Tiger the *seme*'s father and male family members are strong, masculine figures who act on their entitlement to the gaze in a particularly intrusive and humiliating way. That is, they openly watch the *uke* and *seme* having sex, on one occasion offering advice: 'C'mon,

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<sup>6</sup> I am drawing specifically on the theory of the *male gaze* in this paper as developed in feminist film theory

get your butt up’, and making judgements: ‘Forty points’ (Tiger 2009: 70). Moreover, that the gaze is hijacked by men in general is portrayed in the male wolf pack watching and, ultimately, applauding the couple’s love-making (Tiger 2009: 148). In complete contrast, in the same story (Tiger), the *uke*’s father, who is powerful yet strange and animalistic, is not allowed by the couple to watch their intimacies (2011: 56-57) and his marginalisation in the patriarchal structure makes the link between his stare and the gaze decidedly fragile.

Figure 2:

The decoupling of the gaze from men is explored in more detail in the most typical age-stratified story Waru. A metaphor used often to capture the apparatus of the gaze is that of the camera. The front cover of Waru shows the uke handcuffed, the seme holding a knife to his throat as seen through a viewfinder (Figure 2). In contrast, on the first inner page is a drawing of the uke smiling and holding the seme on a leash overlaid on newspaper text and, hence, suggestive of a printed photograph. Then the double panel drawing introducing chapter 1, which is reproduced on the back cover of the book, echoes the front cover except that the pair are lying on their backs on the ground handcuffed together. Moreover, this third image appears to have a hole in it radiating fracture lines suggesting that it is an image in a mirror or behind glass. These three pictures capture the central argument of this article: that age-stratified BL works as a feminist critique of patriarchy through the mechanism of phallic divestiture. Images sustained by the phallic gaze, specifically of male entitlement to dominate women and non-phallic men (Figure 2, front cover), is undermined through experimenting with an alternative possible Symbolic (first inner page), and shown to be fragile/have a hole in it (introduction to chapter 1, back cover). And this interpretation is bolstered by the fact

that all three pictures are constructed so as to highlight their mediated nature<sup>7</sup>: images of two contrasting Symbolic fields, one of which is/becomes damaged.

The figure through which this critique of patriarchy is explored particularly thoroughly in *Waru* is the *seme*'s father who is shown to video-record intrusively his son's sexual exploits. The drawing of concentric circles and their centre point on the cover suggest that the image portrays the *seme* and *uke* through the viewfinder of a policeman's gun. However, the cover is not commensurate with all the visual details of this scene in the manga and the image echoes also the voyeuristic use of the camera by the *seme*'s father. This ambiguity coheres with my argument that it is an impersonal phallic gaze that is evoked here in that the symbolic Father also represents the law and its prohibitions (Rodriguez 2001). As described above, the *seme*'s father – as representative of the Father - is made to confront his essential castration at many points throughout the text and his attempt to hold onto power—to be the source of the gaze—severely undermined. I will return again to the construction of the cover of *Waru* in the conclusion.

#### Men on the market

Before considering the portrayal of the mother in age-stratified BL, I would like to make an important observation and consolidate my consideration of the male characters. Irigaray (1977) speculates that 'starting with the possible exchange of women, the entire enigma of the money form—of the phallic function—is implied' (177). Similarly, economic processes are strikingly present in the age-stratified stories studied linked to the cluster of codes around 'professional/expertise hierarchy', as is the way in which male characters are commodified by other men.

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<sup>7</sup> BL manga titles alluding to the mediated nature of the image and to the gaze are not uncommon, for example: 'Camera, Camera, Camera'; 'Target in the Finder'; 'The View through the Lens'; 'Without the Gods Seeing'; 'If I can see you Anytime'; 'Beyond the Lens'; 'Glasses Love'; 'Hot Steamy Glasses' ([https://www.academia.edu/5083990/Boys\\_Love\\_YAOI\\_manga\\_sample](https://www.academia.edu/5083990/Boys_Love_YAOI_manga_sample))

Waru commences with the *uke*'s kidnap by the *seme* for ransom. To his wealthy father, his 'treasure' (p. 16), is worth 'anything! A hundred million, a billion!' (p. 15). In contrast, to the *seme*, he is worth only 'the promotional discount price of 70 million' (p. 16). Towards the end of the story, it is the *seme* who is kidnapped for ransom and by a man (pertinently, a celebrity economist) who also commodifies men through buying their sexual services. In *Wolves*, the *seme* is shown to have been treated like a commodity in having been taken in by relatives for insurance money when his parents were killed and whose uncle subsequently abused him as a sexual object. Moreover, in *Wolves*, a seemingly male figure is revealed to be an exchange woman betrothed to the *uke*'s older brother who questions the arrangement: 'Why would you want me? Our clan forced our engagement solely to bear children' (p. 187). In *Rain*, the *uke* is manipulated into having sex with the *seme* in exchange for his brother's education and jobs for victimised staff. He is also expected by his father to have sex with a male business partner to seal a deal. Similarly, in *Dog*, the *uke*'s talent for making money on the markets is appropriated by his father: 'Even if he's locked in his room, all he needs to do is move one little finger to make money...wring him dry' (p. 37). And he is used to bolster his father's prestige and homosocial Yakuza bonds through being offered as a sexual plaything to the *seme*. In *Canary*, the *uke* is commodified in having been purchased by a nightclub owner and working for her, imprisoned, as a singer. In *Tiger*, Wolf abducts Tiger—his 'trophy' (2009: 3)—to be his wife. Finally, even in the least typical age-stratified story in my corpus – *Fangs* – as a vampire, the *seme* directly commodifies humans as sustenance and the one victim consumed in the story is male.

The multiple and striking examples of male commodification in these stories positions men in the place usually inhabited by women. *Uke* and *seme*, themselves, are often captured within intra- and inter-familial economies in which their value is one of use and exchange between men and their male entitlement to be dealers in this system eroded. This process is,

of course, central also outside the diagenesis of these texts in that the Boys' Love genre is a commercial product which places men on the market.

The phallic mother

I have suggested that father-figures in age-stratified BL are often emasculated and their assumption of the gaze undermined. On the other hand, mother-figures can be portrayed as phallic. Women's reproductive capacity means that the exchange of the phallus from father to son must be routed through the mother and, in patriarchy, woman's 'responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it' (Irigaray 1977: 185).

However, from the perspective of her children, the mother is 'phallic' (entitled and powerful) until the Oedipal stage when her lesser status (castration) is recognised. However, a woman may also be phallic to the extent of the give in more equitable patriarchal systems or, due to unusual circumstances, such as the absence of male heirs, finds herself in a structural position reserved for men.

The *seme*'s mother is mentioned in only two of the eight stories and plays little role in the narrative: in *Wolves* she has been killed many years earlier and in *Corner* she is shown merely in one panel in the kitchen (p. 34). On the other hand, the *uke*'s mother-figure is mentioned in six of the eight stories, and although in four of these she has died before the story commences, she is still an important figure. Moreover, in all but one story in which she is mentioned, the *uke*'s mother can be described as 'phallic': structurally powerful and/or resistant to her designated role in patriarchy. Hence, in age-stratified BL, the *uke*'s mother often is key in her own right as well as in terms of the *uke*'s identification with her.

In *Waru* the *uke*'s mother married a wealthy and influential man, bore him a son, divorced and left him to raise the *uke*, but continues to receive money from her ex-husband. She is a conspicuous consumer, sexually predatory, and ready to re-marry her ex-husband for inheritance when he might be dying. However, although she has some financial privileges

through motherhood, and has avoided domesticity, she does not inhabit a powerful social space separate from her sexual attractiveness and is treated misogynously by the seme and uke: seme - 'You might've nailed a stake in my heart if only you'd been a little more helpless and a little less calculating' (p. 88), uke - 'It's because of her that I hate women' (p. 71). Even so, she is portrayed as agentic, indeflatable, and as a having moments of empathic insight.

Rain commences with the death of the *uke's* mother: the mistress of a powerful and wealthy man, who bore him two sons, but who chose to remain his mistress and, hence, to retain rights in herself. This, however, was motivated through recognising the wife's prior entitlement, and at the cost of financial insecurity, and her sons are engulfed by their father's family after her death. Interestingly, while the legitimate oldest son is named their father's first heir, the two illegitimate boys are named second and third heirs, and the legitimate daughter is married-out against her will to a business associate in an explicit alliance-building strategy. The primacy of men, sons or not, is also underscored in the puzzling arc that the daughter had planned to secure inheritance through marriage to her father's right hand man, the seme.

In *Dog*, the *uke's* mother inherits a Yakuza clan leadership but becomes pregnant through rape, follows an obligation to marry the father of her child - by which her authority then passes to him - and she dies very young, although we are not told how. In *Wolves*, the *uke's* mother is a werewolf married to a human and, hence, positioned symbolically and 'literally' as phallic since she is by far the physically stronger of the pair. In *Canary*, the *uke's* mother-figure is, herself, a consumer having bought the uke and making money from him as a singer in her nightclub in which he is imprisoned in her phallic tower. However, she is unable to retain her 'treasure' (Canary 2005: p. 134), including his virginity, and he escapes with the seme.

So, the *uke*'s phallic mother, although wrestling some entitlements and independence within patriarchal systems, does not usually fare well. Gains are difficult to maintain and freedom comes at a cost: often the cost of her life, and a woman's reproductive capacity is shown to be the biological underpinning of her commodification. Earlier the analysis demonstrated how the uke is strongly identified with his mother. However, although feminised, he does not risk, like her, the physical and social dangers of reproduction (see McLelland, 2000) and, as I discuss in the conclusion, power still bypasses the mother and settles on her son. As Irigaray (1985) points out: 'the rivalry [over the phallus] is, in fact between the man and (his) mother. And woman is well and truly castrated from the viewpoint of this economy' (33).

### Conclusion

...for a female subject to re-encounter femininity from within a male body is clearly to experience it under different terms – to live it no longer as disenfranchisement and subordination, but rather as phallic divestiture, as a way of saying 'no' to power. It is thus, as I discovered, to alter forever her own relationship to femininity's defining tropes.

Kaja Silverman (1992: 389)

In the 1970s, when female mangaka first published homoerotic stories, they tended to be tragedies and two of the stories studied here have unhappy endings. The atypical age-stratified story Fangs concludes with the uke pitying the *seme*'s inability to overcome his vampiric – commodifying - nature. And in Dog, just as his mother's involvement with his father catalysed her demise, the *uke*'s attempt to escape him ends also in death. Not only does the *uke*'s father die (possibly a murder arranged by the uke himself), but the couple are attacked by rival Yakuza during their attempted escape and the *seme* is killed. Moreover, evocatively, as the uke lies in hospital, the domestic bliss that might have been theirs is rendered only to be revealed to be a coma-induced dream (Dog 2011: 118-9).

Happy endings are the mainstay of the contemporary genre and *Wolves and Tiger* end with the couple living in contented domesticity; *Canary* with the uke and seme's escape together; and *Corner* with the couple reunited at the uke's college. In *Waru*, the uke has grown into a competent young man, still in a relationship with the seme, and on the brink of becoming a successful politician. And in *Rain* the uke heads a blissful domestic unit with his retired father and younger brother, is a successful CEO, and has his seme-secretary by his side. Hence, in six of the eight stories, unlike most of their mothers, ukes achieve relationship harmony and, importantly, accede to power in the way in which some of their mothers attempted but were unable to sustain.

It is tempting to suggest that the shift from tragic to happy endings – noted also by Aoyama (2013) - demonstrates increasing optimism that the current symbolic order, in which both men and women are horribly constricted in terms of gender and sexual forms, can be changed. A strategy experimented with in, at least, age-stratified BL is that of phallic divestiture 'whereby the masculine subject is forced to confront his own lack, and is remade in the image of woman' (Silverman 1988: 224-225). However, a symptomatic reading might suggest that happy endings are a defensive strategy and contemporary tragic endings a 'return of the repressed' expressing the fear that, even if the will is there, men's teeth will keep growing back, or that if the house of cards is pulled down there is nothing with which to replace it.

The predominantly female author- and reader-ship of BL allows me to speculate that these stories, or at least a factor in the success of the genre, is that they speak to a contemporary female fantasmatic defined as a cluster of intensely-charged, shared fantasies that provide a structure to psychic formations (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973). I see the fantasmatic tapped by BL as fundamentally social in origin and springing from the conditions which catalysed also second wave feminism in the 1970s when parodic, erotic male-male

slash fiction also developed in the West (Penley 1991) and the founding texts of, what was to become, BL were first published in Japan (Mizoguchi 2003). Saitō argues that ‘in yaoi female desire it is important that one be a lacking subject oneself. So excluding women from yaoi texts is more or less necessary in order for the reader to alienate herself as the agent of desire’ (235). However, my identification of the crucial role of the *uke*’s mother in some of these stories – and of female characters in the work of other BL mangaka (Aoyama 2013) – belies, or at least complicates, Saitō’s theory and instead I turn to Silverman (1988) who explores a similar fantasmatic, particularly vividly in relation to the cinema of Liliana Cavani.

As I suggest in relation to BL, Silverman identifies a critique of the existing symbolic order through the vehicle of men in which ‘(t)hese figures are thus in some peculiar way simultaneously ‘male’ and ‘not-male’ [and hence] at the boundaries of sexual difference, beyond the phallic pale’ (1988: 220-1). Cavani’s men retreat from power. In contrast, although BL presents a similar non-hegemonic engendering – the *uke* – this can be a powerful figure, as yet unintelligible in the Symbolic, but potentially and radically inhabitable by both men and women. Silverman (1992) argues ‘(t)hose attempts at a collective self-redefinition which rely on masquerade, parody, inversion, and bricolage, will [...] be more successful than those aimed at the *ex nihilo* creation of new images, since they work upon the existing cultural imaginary’ (150) And these are the fundamental strategies of BL and related fan activity such as *dojinshi* and cross-play (Nagaike and Yoshida 2011).

I have drawn on key texts from second wave feminism to make sense of the patterns found in the eight stories selected for analysis not because I planned to, but because it best aided my analysis of the central themes identified. My argument is that, while these manga may appear on the face of it to be merely trivial and controversially-titillating, they function on another level as an innovative and sophisticated challenge to patriarchal forms. In particular, their Oedipal themes, while sexually provocative, also critique fundamental

mechanisms constituting the gendered subject. I cannot, of course, guarantee that all age-stratified BL will resonate with the patterns proposed in this article. However, Fangs was included as the least typical age-stratified story in my corpus and, although, with, for example, no mother-figures in the narrative, I could not relate all my themes to this text, it cohered with the general emphasis of my argument and contributed evidence of a possible common *weltanschauung*.

Age-stratified BL may have lent itself to understanding in terms of intra-family dynamics and economic process because of the relative youth of one of the main protagonists and the age difference between the romantic partners may have facilitated a feminist analysis through echoing power differences between men and women. However, Žižek, (1992) argues that '(i)n Europe, Japan functions as a kind of fantasy screen onto which one projects one's 'repressed'' (199) and from, a Japanese perspective, Saitō's (2007) view is that approaches such as I have suggested 'are too political, and one should be aware that this sort of commonly used feminist criticism is often denied by many yaoi-creators and readers' (163). In fact, BL can be viewed as misogynist in its representation of, and fan reaction to, female characters (e.g., Blair 2008) and homophobic in its appropriation of representations of male homosexuality (e.g., Ishida 2015). However, in this could be the seed of a productive, and fascinating dialectical reversal. Žižek argues<sup>8</sup> that such splitting - the possibility of the opposing interpretations of BL as feminist/misogynist, homophobic/homophilic - indicates 'two mutually exclusive endeavours to cope with [a] traumatic antagonism' (1992: 253): by implication that BL 'stands in for, holds the place of, a certain formal disturbance, a stain which blurs the field of vision' (Žižek 1992: 136). The 'field of vision' is that of the Father – the Symbolic - the logic of which is disturbed when refracted through woman: that is, when she is positioned at the origin of the gaze (see also Hemmann 2015). This is suggested in

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<sup>8</sup> The illustrative example used is Lévi -Strauss' analysis of different conceptualisations of village layout by the two subgroups of a Great Lake's tribe

beautifully encapsulated form when the female reader looks at the cover of Waru where she takes the position of the Father, the implications of which and will provoke continual, fascinating study.

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