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*Boys' Love* manga for girls: Paedophilic, satirical, queer readings and English law

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Children, Sexuality and 'Sexualisation': Beyond spectacle and sensationalism

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***Boys' Love* manga for girls: Paedophilic, satirical, queer readings and English law**

*Magic Land Friends*

*Shiro:* A boy from the cat family became Al's apprentice in hopes of becoming a wizard.

*Al:* A great wizard...but not a responsible adult. Always lusting after Shiro.

*Kett:* The butler at Al's estate. There's a person under the bunny costume.

*Tora:* Shiro's older brother. Visits Al's estate often out of worry for Shiro and desire to see Kett.

*Suzuhara (2006) 'Here in Magic Land'*

Suzuhara's collection of yonkoma (4-panel) comic strips 'Here in Magic Land' are published in 'J-BOY by Biblos' (2006). This is an English-language anthology of original Japanese manga (comics) of the genre known as Boys' Love (BL)<sup>1</sup>. The cast of characters reproduced above, and the scenarios they imply, indicate some of the motifs around which BL revolves. The sine qua non of BL is the portrayal of romantic and sexual relationships between young, often adolescent, males. It is sometimes very explicit and can contain themes of intra-familial attraction, BDSM<sup>2</sup>, and seeming inter-species eroticism (e.g., between human(oids) and cat-boy hybrids such as the character 'Shiro').

Manga has developed in a commercial context in which products are designed to appeal to markets segmented by age and gender, and BL is a sub-genre of Shōjo manga targeted at females from early adolescence to early adulthood. The visually cute characterisation, embellished drawing style, and creative panelling typical of Shōjo is found in BL and it is known that most BL mangaka (artist-authors) are female, as are most of the consumers (Mizoguchi, 2003). Not only are the majority of BL readers female, they tend also to be teenagers or young adults (Pagliassotti, 2008b). Most female BL readers are heterosexual, although there is a significant minority audience of self-identifying lesbian and

bi-sexual women and the queer nature of the BL phenomenon, itself, presents a challenge to, and parodies, reified sexual orientation and gender categories (Wood, 2006)<sup>3</sup>.

BL is massively popular across East and Southeast Asia (e.g., Abraham, 2008; Li, 2009; Noh, 1998; Zhou, 2009), and has a growing international audience, and increasing availability of commercially-translated manga across the world has contributed to the wave of influence known as the ‘Japanification’ of youth culture (West, 2008). With this has come concern that manga contain an inordinate amount of sexual violence and other noxious sexual material, particularly the paedophilic, and this has spurred contemporary sexualisation debates (e.g., Allison, 2000; Perper & Cornog, 2002). The manga genres Lolicon and Shotacon contain erotic material portraying young, often pre-pubescent, girls and boys respectively. Male-male Shotacon is sometimes considered a BL sub-genre but ‘Almost Crying’ (Takahashi, 2006) is probably the only original Japanese Shotacon commercially available in English. However, other manga marketed in English as BL have strong Shotacon resonances, such as ‘Here in Magic Land’, in which, in terms of both context and presentation, some characters seem designed to be understood as pubescent or younger.

Sexualisation debates are, therefore, very relevant to BL as a site within which teenage girls and young women are negotiating global, sexualized cultures and the controversially young characters that are sometimes portrayed in this erotica. Moreover, BL is particularly interesting because it appears to challenge assumptions about the nature of young women’s erotic interests, their engagement with what might be considered transgressive pornography, and turn on its head stereotypes regarding whom is creating and consuming such material. And all this is happening within the context of increasing legislative regulation.

### **English legal context relevant to BL**

*...out of worry for Shiro...*

Several inter-related areas of law are potentially relevant to BL manga, including those on obscenity, child pornography, and copyright. The following discussion refers to legislation covering England, some of which applies also to other parts of the United Kingdom. For simplicity, I will often use the term ‘English’ but do provide the detailed jurisdiction for specific legislation in endnotes<sup>4</sup>.

The Obscene Publications Acts<sup>5</sup> 1959 and 1964 concern the dealing of obscene material, or possession with intent to deal. The test of obscenity in relation to these acts has come to be understood as the powerful and corrosive tendency to deprave and corrupt a significant proportion of the likely audience. This is a relatively stringent test and books and magazines have the additional defence of ‘merit’ in terms of science, literature, art or learning, as do other media and art forms, though to a lesser extent, and there is a requirement to consider the material as a whole. More recently, Section 63<sup>6</sup> of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 has extended criminal liability to the possession of extreme pornographic images deemed to be obscene, graphic and realistic, citing specifically necrophilia, bestiality, and violence which is life-threatening or which might result in serious injury. Importantly, ‘obscene’ here has the less demanding meaning of grossly offensive or disgusting when considered in context. There have been relatively few successful convictions for obscenity under these acts making it difficult to conceive what (non-paedophilic) material might be considered uncontroversially noxious and it is unlikely that BL falls foul of these legislations. BL may include Act-defined extreme elements such as (seeming) bestiality but, as drawings, could not be mistaken for the real thing and, as artwork with a well-documented stylistic pedigree, could probably claim some artistic merit.

Of growing relevance to manga, and to genres such as BL in particular, are the laws relating to child pornography. In England, this legislation has built-up in stages and it is worthwhile considering several significant steps. The Protection of Children Act 1978<sup>7</sup> made it illegal to take, make, and distribute indecent photographs of children, or to possess such material with intent to distribute. Possession, itself, of such material was made illegal in the Criminal Justice Act 1988<sup>8</sup>, and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994<sup>9</sup> extended this to include photographic derivatives such as tracings and pseudo-photographs, e.g., photograph-like material made by computer graphics. The Sexual Offences Act 2003<sup>10</sup> then redefined a ‘child’ from being a person under 16 years old to a person under 18 years old. Even more stringently, the Coroners and Justice Act 2009<sup>11</sup> created a new offence of possessing a prohibited image of a child, extending this to include images of adults where the predominant impression given is that it is a child. This latter legislation also clarified, for the first time, that a non-photographic prohibited image of a child includes computer generated images (CGI's), cartoons, manga images and drawings.

As this short summary illustrates, the English child pornography laws have become increasingly stringent. Legislation was first against production and dealing and then extended also to possession; moved from a narrow, actual-age-based definition of ‘child’ to a wider, impression-of-age-based one; and expanded the type of prohibited image from the photographic to include also free-hand drawings of fantasy encounters which might involve imaginary beings. Moreover, specific use of the word ‘manga’ in recent legislation demonstrates how it has attracted particular concern in England.

Most BL in commercial English translation contain a disclaimer on the credits page to the effect that ‘all characters depicted in sexually explicit scenes in this publication are at least the age of consent or older’. Such statements may be problematic on the global stage.

Age of consent for specific kinds of sexual acts (e.g., depending on partners' sex or age) varies according to jurisdiction. In Japan, national age of consent for heterosexual relations is 13 years, but is as high as 18 years in some prefectures, and legislation is mute on same sex activity. However, significantly, in England, as explained, it is not age of consent, or even age of participants per se, which is definitional of child pornography, but predominant impression of a personage being under 18 years old (see Clough, 2012).

Manga's relationship to impression of protagonist age is particularly complex. As a cartoon form, manga illustrations usually do not attempt to portray characters realistically (Cohn, 2013). In fact, caricature is almost an inherent feature of comics, as is the incorporation of fantasy beings such as super-heroes, cyborgs, and anthropomorphised non-human animals. Shōjo manga, in particular, has evolved a visual style which exaggerates youthfulness including large eyes, domed foreheads, and small chins as a convention of *kawaii* (cute) culture for which Japan is famous. Large eyes can codify age, but also female gender and relative innocence which have no necessary link to age (Grigsby, 1999). Moreover, the visual age of a character can vary across the narrative because rendering style, such as extreme deformation, is used to portray effects such as fleeting inner states and may infantilise character appearance. Character portrayal, including apparent age, may also be inconsistent over the course of a narrative due to time constraints and the use of assistants. These kinds of stylisation, codification, and practical issues mean that protagonist age cannot be read from manga images in terms of realism<sup>12</sup> and sexually explicit stories may appear populated by characters who look, at times, very young but who are in contexts that make it clear they are to be understood to be adults (e.g., in college, university, and the workplace). This is not to say, however, that age ambiguity is always inadvertent.

The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 specifies that Prohibited Images of Children (from here on ‘PIC’) can include cartoons, manga, and drawings. However, for non-photographic images of children to reach prohibited status they must fulfil all of three specified criteria: they must be (1) pornographic (with reference both to the image itself and to the context in which it appears); (2) grossly offensive, disgusting, or otherwise of an obscene character (according to the ordinary dictionary definition of ‘obscene’); and (3) focused on the child’s genitals or anal region or portrayal any of a given list of acts<sup>13</sup> (including sex acts in the presence of a child and/or involving a child). If a prosecution is brought, fulfilment of these criteria is for the magistrates, District Judge, or jury to determine. Even though BL may include characters in sexual contexts who are interpretable as ‘children’ under English law (i.e., predominant impression of being under 18 years old), it is by no means certain that such texts would meet the required criteria of being also pornographic and obscene. As a literature, BL is diverse and spans tender love stories and dramas through to more transgressively-themed erotica but, even when exploring socially-deviant sexuality, tends to emphasise relationships, subjective experience, and feelings such as embarrassment, which is not typical of pornography and provides a context in which to understand sexual explicitness as not obscene.

Probably in response to copyright laws, many manga include on the credits page a disclaimer that ‘any likeness of characters, places, and situations featured in this publication to actual persons (living or deceased), events, places, and situations is purely coincidental’. In relation to English legislation, the accuracy of this statement is vital with regard to sexualised images of characters appearing to be under 18 years old and at least one BL mangaka has been accused of using photographs of adult men from gay pornography as source material without permission. Hence, there is a risk that some BL may contravene The

Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 because its creation involved the tracing or copying of photographs of actual children in sexualised contexts. Innocent possession of such images, that is having no reason to believe that they are anything other than imaginary and hand-drawn, is a defence under the Criminal Justice Act 1988, presumably as long as the images do not also contravene the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 (i.e., that they are not also pornographic and obscene). Finally, even if copyright permission is obtained to include manga images in other material, such as research reports, drawings presented out of context could meet the criteria of a prohibited image of a child under English law, even if they do not do so within the original work taken as a whole.

Having provided an overview of relevant English law, I will now explore how BL problematises key assumptions of the recent PIC legislation, and raises concerns about its ramifications, including, but extending beyond, the profound definitional ambiguities of the terms ‘pornography’, ‘obscene’, and ‘child’. Specifically, I argue that the legislation invites a literal, and privileges a singular, reading of fantasy, erotic, visual texts – such as BL. The legislation invites a *literal* reading through implying that given criteria coherent for the assessment of representational texts (e.g., photographs of children<sup>14</sup>) can be applied also to non-representational texts (i.e., fantasy drawings) and awarded moral status similar to that of the real (e.g., that protagonist age in manga can, within the ordinary everyday parameters of impression, be determined has been critiqued above). Perhaps even more problematic, the legislation invites a *singular* reading of texts through priming a search for the reified elements by a defined audience (magistrates, District Judge, or jury) under the remit that a certain constellation may warrant prohibition. Specifically, it alerts hegemonically-empowered or hegemonically-representational groups to a *paedophilic reading* and disavows other possible readings as irrelevant if *these* groups can find *that* reading.

### **Critiquing the legislative invitation to a single, literal, paedophilic reading**

#### *A boy from the cat family...*

I prefaced this chapter with the character list of Suzuhara's humorous collection of 28 BL yonkoma 'Here in Magic Land' and will use this non-explicit manga to ground my critique of PIC because this example allows me to raise important issues of wider applicability. I comment on this manga in general, but select for particular consideration the yonkoma 'Imagination Blizzard!' (Figure 1) because it facilitates in condensed form three important readings: paedophilic, satirical, and queer, each engaging a distinct affective register: titillation, ridicule, and anguish. Each is a reading from within a different frame of reference but are not mutually exclusive and can be appreciated in different ways at a different – but also at the same – time. None of these is the correct reading and others are also possible. My argument is, however, that the paedophilic reading is privileged in PIC.

#### *Paedophilic reading: Stop corrupting Shiro!*

Shotacon often draw on childhood themes in their titles (e.g., 'Jack in the Box' by Kirico Higashizato or 'Toy Player' by Negi Yokoyama). Similarly, 'Here is Magic Land' invites association with nursery rhymes, fairy tales and, particularly, the children's literature 'Peter Pan' (Neverland) and 'Alice in Wonderland'. The paedophilic resonances of both books have infiltrated popular culture and are explored, for example, in Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's (2006) graphic novel 'Lost Girls'. The title panel of 'Here in Magic Land' shows Al – the wizard - sitting on a crescent moon reaching towards the reader with a small star cupped in his hand and the caption: "Twinkle, twinkle little star. Become a wonderful dream and reach out to everyone!" Shiro is pictured to the side, clinging precariously to a large star, in ambiguous spatial relationship to Al. He could be merely next to Al or his predicament could be a close-up of the star in Al's hand. The latter implies that Shiro's safety

is ‘in Al’s hands’ but also, maybe, that he is being ‘taken in hand’ - particularly since the manga is presented as Shiro’s “training diary” – evoking the connotation that he is being sexually groomed. This interpretation is amplified in the first yonkoma. Following the introduction that “Shiro just keeps on learning so many odd things”, Shiro proudly demonstrates the “neat trick” Master Al has taught him, pulling his cat tail between his legs and announcing to Kett’s horror: “it’s a cock”.

Although no age is specified in the text, Shiro wears the short trousers associated with elementary school-age boys in Japan, is small relative to other characters, is presented as childlike (e.g., holding a doll in the image of Al, easily moved to tears, chirpy and physically affectionate), and is identified as being the Wizard’s apprentice. This context suggests that he is to be considered pre-adolescent and that Al’s desire for, and sexualisation of, Shiro indexes Al’s wish for – and possibly development of - a pederastic relationship.

In ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ Shiro is shown cross-dressed sequentially in three outfits: a strapless basque-like dress and long gloves; an air-hostess uniform; and a short nightdress. As Shiro walks past, seemingly unperturbed by this clothing, he is watched in silent shock by his visiting older brother. By the third panel Tora can take no more. He assumes that Al is “ordering” Shiro to wear these inappropriately sexualising costumes and demands that he stop complying: “Take that off”. However, in the fourth and final punch-line panel Shiro is transformed into wearing a girl’s nightdress right in front of Tora’s eyes and this reveals that what Tora is actually witnessing is ‘imagination magic’ in which Al the Wizard is making manifest his sexual fantasies.

‘Here in Magic Land’ is readable as a titillating portrayal of Al the paedophile’s exploitation of power over his charge in order to realise his sexual desires, the yonkoma ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ showing how he does so right under the nose of his victim’s family

and unabashed by the moral outrage his behaviour inspires. The dark humour in this reading is produced by the daring and succinct capture of the paedophilic imagination.

*Satirical reading: Is he naked under that?!*

Satirical humour ridicules its subject matter and can offer insightful social critique. Cartoons are a traditional medium for social and political satire (Tower, 1982), with, for example, cultural anxieties over paedophilia parodied in series such as ‘Family Guy’ in which elderly neighbour John Herbert’s predilections and inappropriately sexualising innuendos are missed by Peter and Lois who employ him to babysit their children. One technique of satire is exaggeration, and a source of humour throughout ‘Here in Magic Land’ is that Shiro is flirtatious yet obtuse to Al’s salacious intensions to an outlandish extent. Specifically, in ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ he appears to be amazingly unaware of how he is dressed or, at least, of the titillating effect it may have. A satirical reading raises the possibility that Shiro has more agency and is more knowing than he seems – and Shiro’s ownership of an ‘AI doll’ with which he can ‘play’ hints his possible power. This, then, alludes to the socially taboo ramification that Shiro may, to some extent, be deliberately inciting attention - Al’s lust but also Tora’s shock - and playing the two men off against each other.

Al’s behaviour throughout the manga is also exaggeratedly outrageous and so can be read as satirising the social demonization of the paedophile: a figure who, by implication, is imbued with extraordinary power - like that of a wizard. Mirroring this cultural preoccupation, legislation has become increasingly stringent and focused on inspecting texts for their propensity to incite paedophilic desire. Paradoxically, this requires individuals to partake in the ‘paedophilic gaze’: to look at texts as they imagine a paedophile would look (Adler, 2001; Stapleton, 2010). And in ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ this is what Tora does.

Although shocked, he can ‘see’ Al’s fantasy and understands that Shiro may be sexually

arousing in these costumes. More than this, however, Tora seeks out sexualising detail beyond what might be deemed necessary, asking “Is he naked under that?!” This raises for critical inspection the possible prurience of extensive social and legislative interest in, and prioritisation of, paedophilic readings of texts. Moreover, given that Tora’s concern over Shiro’s possible lack of underwear makes sense only with the diegesis of the manga (there is, of course, no ‘under’ a drawing), a satirical reading ridicules the point of view that affords non-representational drawings moral status akin that of actual children and which, by implication risks demeaning the seriousness of real harm done to them<sup>15</sup>.

*Queer reading: Imagination blizzard!*

Queer theory in its deconstructive iteration (e.g., Sullivan, 2003) draws attention to, and celebrates, slippage between dichotomously conceived categorisation and in so doing challenges a hegemonic worldview that disavows that which is betwixt-and- between. Where categories are placed in opposition, one is usually associated with greater hegemonic value and the second othered. Hence, queer theory is also a critique of dominant status and power hierarchies. As outlined in the introduction, BL can be understood to parody bifurcated social categories, particularly those associated with sexuality and gender and ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ facilitates a profoundly condensed and extensive exploration of the queer. Unrecognised in majority culture, that disavowed is abjected and so a queer reading of the yonkoma evokes the anguish of non-identity, or at the very least, of devalued identity: a preoccupation also associated with the liminal stage of adolescence (Erikson, 1968) which is when the majority of readers start engaging with BL (Li, 2009; Pagliassotti, 2008b).

I identify eight ways in which ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ offers a queer critique of opposed categories – and likely there are more. I articulate the identified relevant categories with what is arguably the higher status pole, with respect to the UK context, placed first.

1. Male/female: Due to the cross-dressing, isolated from context, Shiro's gender is held in suspense until the final panel where it is captured in pronoun: "Is *he* naked under that?!" Within the wider context of the manga, it is clear that Shiro is to be considered male, but the ease with which he appears to wear women's clothing and could pass for female in the yonkoma raises for critical inspection the restricting social conventions of attire and associated reification and dichotomisation of gender.
2. Heterosexual/homosexual: Given that Al's fantasy in this yonkoma is Shiro dressed as a female, the nature of Al's sexual attraction is not clearly either homosexual or heterosexual.
3. Human/animal: Shiro and Tora are drawn as humanoid-feline hybrid. This mixes and confounds the strongly enforced and emotive boundary between human and animal, particularly with regard to sexuality (Fudge, 2002). Al, himself, is portrayed as a human(oid) and hence his desire for Shiro could be both paedophilic and bestial, but in a way possible only in fantasy since the personages could not exist in reality.
4. Reality/fantasy: The yonkoma portrays Al's sexual imagination made real and hence plays with and explores the relationship between fantasy and reality. However, Al is able to realise his fantasy only as an aesthetic fabrication and within the diegetic premise that he is a wizard. A queer reading therefore engages a critique that concern over non-representational, erotic visual texts is a conflation of categories in paradoxical bolstering of the literal.
5. Animate/inanimate: In the first panel of the yonkoma Shiro carries a broom, which is a recognisable prop of wizardry. Earlier in the series, Shiro is taught how to make his broom speak through 'conversation magic' and hence merges the boundary between animate and inanimate. This is a specific example of a wider exploration of the

boundary between reality and fantasy but one which is very pertinent given critique that PIC risks conflating the moral status of real, ‘animate’ children with fantasy, ‘inanimate’ drawings.

6. Public/private: That AI’s fantasy is made visible to Tora, plays with and explores the permeability of the boundary between public and private. Within context, this raises wider issues around public scrutiny and assessment of the private sphere, particular in terms of the policing of non-hegemonic sexualities. More than this, the yonkoma raises critique of legislative reach into the sexual *imagination* as manifested in non-representational visual texts (McLelland, 2012).
7. Caucasian/Oriental: ‘Here in Magic Land’ is an original Japanese manga and yet the characterisation, as is typical of much manga, is racially odourless (Iwabuchi, 2002). Protagonists are interpretable as Oriental, Caucasian, Asian, Eurasian – amongst others – and, hence, conceives ‘race’ as a queer concept.
8. West/East: AI is dressed in Western attire and Tora in a Japanese kimono, each with a respective culturally-compatible name, and throughout the manga no clear ‘real-world’ setting is implied. The cultural situatedness of ‘Here in Magic Land’ is therefore made pertinent but also made queer through ambiguation. Interestingly, it is AI (the ‘West’) who is presented as perverse and Tora (the ‘East’) as upholding sexual morality. This suggests the critique that international concern over aspects of Japanification is a manifestation of the West’s own sexual preoccupations.

The sheer number of dichotomous categories played with and ambiguated in this yonkoma allows an interpretation of its title – ‘Imagination Blizzard!’ – as indexing the creatively disorienting potential of queer readings to unsettle taken-for-granted hegemonic value hierarchies and meanings.

### **Is the intended audience unimportant?**

*...not a responsible adult...*

PIC is clear in its position on authorial intent and interpretation in relation to the works with which it is concerned. Intent and interpretation are heavily theorised in scholarly consideration of texts and provides a context for understanding the position set-out in the law. In deciding whether or not an image is pornographic it is stated in PIC that '(i)t is not a question of the intentions of those who produced the image'. This disinterest in authorial intent is consistent with the poststructuralist displacement of origin as arbiter of meaning (Barthes, 1967). However, whereas poststructuralism conceives texts to be malleable cultural products open to a range of legitimate interpretations, PIC specifies the groups whose reading practices will decide the pornographic, and ultimately the prohibitive, status of relevant texts: '(w)hether this threshold has been met will be an issue for the magistrates, District Judge or jury to determine'.

Clearly, then, 'audience' is important within PIC but only to the extent that the reading practices of proscribed groups are privileged. These groups inhabit positions of social authority (magistrates, District Judge) and/or deliberately represent majority culture (juries). Importantly, these groups do not represent the intended or actual BL audience which is young, female, and often highly informed with regard to contemporary Japanese popular culture. Extending the queer reading above, the English legislation reproduces a hegemonic hierarchy of power (male, heterosexual, human, reality [literal], public, Caucasian, West, animate) and is in fundamental tension with BL which provides a space for that which is othered (female, homosexual, animal<sup>16</sup>, fantasy, private, Oriental, inanimate). The BL readership is therefore relatively disenfranchised culturally and, I argue, represents a specific, non-hegemonic *interpretative community* as identified in Jenkins' (1992) research on

fanships (which, pertinently, was developed from his work on Western, female, amateur erotica writers of male-male slash fiction).

Fanships as interpretive communities are defined by their ardent interest in, and active sense-making in relation to, the popular culture texts of shared focus. Of particular importance in fanships is the ability to understand both the canonical oeuvre and non-canonical versions and the terms of reference within which disputes around interpretation can be based. There is little research on the frames within which fans read BL but a common theme is that it is considered primarily entertainment (e.g., Li, 2009). Scholarly research suggests that entertainment value may arise from BL understood as *bildungsroman* (coming-of-age narratives), romantic comedies, or even as a new sub-genre of male-male-romance-for-girls (Pagliassotti, 2008a). As I have shown, sometimes at least, more critical readings such as satire or queer are also possible. However, more commonly, I suggest that BL with sexual content partakes of a distinct imaginary space that might be termed *explicit romance* (i.e., not pornographic or obscene) or *sensitive pornography*<sup>17</sup> (i.e., possibly pornographic but not obscene).

English legislation becomes most problematic for Lolicon and Shotacon. There appears to be little research on Shotacon in Japanese and only passing comments on the genre in English language sources (e.g., McLelland, 2000; Zanghellini, 2009) and, unlike BL in general, Tamaki (2007) suggests that Shotacon is produced and consumed by males and females in about equal proportions. In relation to PIC, the age and gender of producers, or of the majority or target audience, is irrelevant. These factors may, however, impact the nature of the material and a distinction is made in the manga community between male-oriented and female-oriented Shotacon, with the latter considered by Tamaki (2007) to be very similar in theme and style to BL. The implication is that female-oriented Shotacon, although explicitly

sexualising male children and youths and incorporating male-male eroticism, are essentially romantic and dramatic narratives. Most importantly, what evidence there is suggests that female readers are not interpreting erotic manga with visually young characters as paedophilia (Tribunella, 2008), reading it out of lascivious paedophilic interest (McLelland, 2000), or being catalysed by it into paedophilic activity - given the low rates of female sexual offending, in general, and the complex and disturbed life contexts in which female sexual abuse of children tends to occur, in specific (Cortoni, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

*There's a person under the bunny costume.*

A central principle underlying child pornography prohibition is that its production, distribution, and viewing does actual harm to children. Although this invites scrutiny in relation to the definition of 'child', 'pornography', and 'harm', I do not wish to pursue critique of this principle with regard to the potential exploitation of young people. A related, but distinct, principle is that child pornography does moral harm to society through condoning and promoting the sexualisation of children, even when no children are harmed in its production. Globalisation, particularly through the internet, has increased the market for, and hence production of, child pornography and there is a case that the sexualisation of 'children' in any form should not be tolerated. However, paradoxically, the attempt to ban sexualising images of children has had the, arguably destructive and distracting, effect of privileging paedophilic interpretations of commonplace and culturally-innovative texts from family photographs to artwork (Kalha, 2011; White, 2011), likely incites boundary pushing in advertising (Vanska, 2011), and may divert attention and resources away from the prevention of real harm to real children.

Drawings might be used to groom children into sexual activity through provoking curiosity and implying that such behavioural is normal. However, legislating against imaginary, non-realistic media such as manga must be of concern since it places overly paternalistic restriction on the expression and sharing of pure fantasy (McLelland, 2012) without evidence that such products are, in themselves, harmful and, seemingly, without adequate understanding of genre conventions (narrative and visual) which *are* understood by the intended audience. With specific reference to PIC, Professor Suzanne Orr has gone as far as stating that we now have ‘an offence with expansive, ill-defined descriptors which may well violate human rights and that could lead to the inclusion of a wide range of material in the ambit of criminalisation’ (2010, p. 254). And similar legislation in the United States<sup>18</sup> was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2002 (Fischel, 2013) only to be resurrected in slightly amended form in the PROTECT<sup>19</sup> Act of 2003 (Wood, 2013).

The young female readers of BL problematise the legislative invitation to a single, literal, paedophilic reading of suspicious texts and the position that the intended audience of these texts is unimportant. What within majority culture may seem to be pornography of the most noxious kind, may actually be relatively safe for young women because it avoids sexualised images of females (which are difficult to disentangle from misogynist connotations), innovatively subverting and side-stepping gender inequalities and, in so doing, offering some women a palatable erotica with regard to which they are extremely underserved in comparison to men. This is not to argue that BL is unproblematic and I am deeply intrigued by the way these texts can be read as innocuous contra their apparently transgressive subject matter. It is important to understand the content of these works and - a major Western cultural challenge - how intelligible, meaningful, non-paedophilic frames are available for reading non-realistic, erotic texts involving visually young characters. However,

currently, well-meaning efforts to protect children will potentially criminalize a sexually-benign youth demographic, most of whom are teenage girls and young women, literate with the conventions of explicit romance in which the protagonists are, to many of them, age-appropriate boys and youths.

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<sup>1</sup> Variously called, with subtle differentiation, Boys' Love (BL), YAOI, or Shōnen-ai

<sup>2</sup> Bondage, Domination, Discipline, Submission, Masochism

<sup>3</sup> It is also likely that the gender binary female and male are problematic for some BL readers

<sup>4</sup> Main sources of information are the Crown Prosecution Service website

<http://www.cps.gov.uk/> and <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> England & Wales

<sup>6</sup> England, Wales, & Northern Ireland

<sup>7</sup> England & Wales with some provisions extending to Scotland & Northern Ireland

<sup>8</sup> England, Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland

<sup>9</sup> England, Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland

<sup>10</sup> England & Wales with some provisions extending to Scotland & Northern Ireland

<sup>11</sup> England & Wales with some provisions extending to Scotland & Northern Ireland

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, characters' race or ethnicity is often visually problematised

<sup>13</sup> 'That the image focuses solely or principally on a child's genitals or anal region, or portrays any of the following acts: the performance by a person of an act of intercourse or oral sex with or in the presence of a child; an act of masturbation by, of, involving or in the presence of a child; an act which involves penetration of the vagina or anus of a child with a part of a person's body or with anything else; an act of penetration, in the presence of a child, of the

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vagina or anus of a person with a part of a person's body or with anything else; the performance by a child of an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive or imaginary); the performance by a person of an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive or imaginary) in the presence of a child'. (Accessed 17 October 2013 [http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p\\_to\\_r/prohibited\\_images\\_of\\_children/index.html#an04](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p_to_r/prohibited_images_of_children/index.html#an04))

<sup>14</sup> I acknowledge, but do not wish to engage with, critique of photographs as representational here and mean merely that, unlike BL manga, photographic media in this context can be considered to be images of real children

<sup>15</sup> Here, it seems perverse that a passage articulating a duty not to possess photographic child pornography, which allegedly appeared in an earlier draft, was removed from recent legislation restricting the sale of erotic manga and anime in Tokyo prefecture (see Anime Network [2010]. *Tokyo ban on sex in anime, manga, games*. Accessed 15th October 2013. [https://www.theanimenetwork.com/component/option,com\\_kunena/Itemid,183/catid,7/func,view/id,70350/](https://www.theanimenetwork.com/component/option,com_kunena/Itemid,183/catid,7/func,view/id,70350/))

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly see Azuma's (2009) theory of otaku (young, usually male, extreme manga, anime, and gaming fans) as 'database animals' and that a Chinese term for female BL fans is 'danmeilang' 耽美狼 which translates literally as 'indulge-in-the-beautiful wolves' (Liu, 2009)

<sup>17</sup> Following 'Sensitive Pornograph' (2007) by Ashika Sakura, 801 Media

<sup>18</sup> Child Pornography Prevention Act 1996

<sup>19</sup> Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today