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Yaoi: Feminized Desire Controlled by Patriarchal Rape Narratives

The Shining Prince: is it Genji, the title character from Murasaki Shikibu's famous tale; one of the *Wakashu* drawn on a print from the Edo period, considered to be a third gender made up of beautiful young men; or a modern day character in a yaoi manga, a Japanese genre of homoerotic comics depicting the romance between male characters? The title could fit any of the above, yet a charming name is not the only connection between the men in these three different types of media. In a darker light, each of these works portray and perpetuate patriarchal power dynamics in which men control female or feminized sexual desire. By exploring the historical examples of this power dynamic in *The Tale of Genji* and the *Wakashu-asobi kyara no makura*, one of the earliest extant works of homoerotic ukiyo-e, the control of feminized sexual desire as the reason for the prevalence of rape in yaoi becomes clear.

Yaoi is part of the larger genre of Boys' Love, which encompasses all romantic narratives between male protagonists. However, yaoi is distinctive in its graphic homoerotic content. Yaoi is not only saturated with pornographic content, but with rape and sexual assault. There are two main characters in a yaoi: the seme, which is the role of the 'top', and the uke, the 'bottom'. The seme is almost always the sexual instigator, and even though both characters are male there are clear differences in what type of desire each character portrays; the seme represents male desire while the uke represents a kind of morphed feminized desire. In many cases, the masculine seme

uses rape as means to express his love and ignite romance in his feminine uke. Even the word origins of seme and uke add to the rape trope: “The verb ‘semeru’ from which seme is derived translates as ‘to attack’ while ‘ukeru,’ from which uke is derived, means ‘to receive.’ It is then built into the seme/uke dynamic that the seme attacks, perhaps violently or sexually, the uke, who receives the attack” (Frennea 11). The attack/receive relationship between seme and uke is the way feminized desire is controlled and directed. Rape as a plot device can range from dubious consent and vague depictions, to explicit violence. But no matter the situation, a ‘happy’ ending in which the uke comes to love the seme always occurs.

The rape trope plays a vital role in *The Tale of Genji*. Written in the 11th century by noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* is considered by most to be a great love story between Genji, the son of a Japanese emperor, and Murasaki, a young girl who captures his attention. However, throughout the text Genji uses his power to manipulate and subjugate Murasaki into becoming his creation, exhibiting the patriarchal values of male dominance in the Heian period. Genji is an extreme example, kidnapping ten year old Murasaki from her female guardians. When the young Murasaki puts up a resistance Genji replies, “‘You are not to sulk, now, and make me unhappy. Would I have done all this for you if I were not a nice man? Young ladies should do as they are told.’ And so the lessons began” (Shikibu 109). Genji uses his position of power in order to manipulate Murasaki, forcing her to think she must accept his goodwill gracefully. Genji’s first step is to take away her autonomy. Murasaki should never “sulk” or show negative emotions which would make Genji unhappy; his satisfaction is paramount compared to her own. Genji aggressively reprimands Murasaki by stating his own qualities as a “nice man.” How could Genji’s motives be immoral when everything he has done

has been for her? He genders his argument by using Murasaki's young age as an excuse for obedience, adding a patriarchal touch. Shikibu ends the paragraph on a eerie note, "And so the lessons began," as if she knows, as the reader eventually receives, that Genji's lessons will embed his will upon the child, destroying any chance that Murasaki will develop her own personality.

As the story progresses it becomes clear that Genji is not only satisfied with dominating Murasaki's personality, but her body as well. *The Tale of Genji* is not a great love story between two willing participants, but rather, the account of one man's insatiable lust. A lust which eventually leads to the rape of an unwilling Murasaki: "He had not seriously thought of her as a wife. Now he could not restrain himself ... She had not dreamed he had anything of the sort on his mind. What a fool she had been, to repose her whole confidence in so gross and unscrupulous a man" (Shikibu 180). The scene may have no graphic details but the implications are unmistakable. Murasaki may be furious at Genji, but she also blames herself. Murasaki is caught in the web of the patriarchy. As a young child, sexual desire is a foreign concept yet she is expected to understand and allow Genji's advances. On the other hand, Genji has been acting as a protector and until his wife dies never expects to bed Murasaki. But in a moment of supposed weakness "he could not restrain himself." The sexual desire Genji holds can not be restrained and soon enough Murasaki forgives and forgets. The rape is used to eventually ignite Murasaki's desire and love. Sexual control or assault is an expression of love in which the victim does not realise their own feelings for the attacker. However, after the assault all is well, with the victim coming to adore their rapist.

The parallels between Genji and Murasaki's relationship and the seme/uke dynamic are clearly seen through the use of rape as a tool to incite control and eventually romantic feelings. Although there are hundreds of yaoi which portray the rape trope, one of the most famous is *Okane Ga Nai*, written by Hitoyo Shinozaki and illustrated by Tohru Kousaka. *Okane Ga Nai* tells the story of Yukiya Ayase who is sold in auction to the highest bidder. The very first page of the yaoi shows Yukiya naked, tears in his eyes, legs spread, bent down, all while the auctioneer announces, "Look at his smooth delicate skin and beautiful chestnut colored hair. And not to forget the shape of his body. We believe that this is something you will rarely find anywhere. And of course his genitalia as well as his posterior are both unused. As soon as you purchase this item, you can directly make sure of this yourself" (Shinozaki 6). Yukiya is a commodity to be bought and sold. He becomes an item whose feminine beauty and virginity are valued more than his own life. Like Murasaki, Yukiya is kidnapped and eventually falls in love with his rapist and buyer Somuku Kanou. Somuku is frighteningly possessive with Yukiya, even when their relationship starts to become romantic. Yukiya is portrayed and treated as a child, unable to do anything himself. He relies on Somuku for all his needs the same way Murasaki is dependent on Genji to marry and support her. Rape and other forms of control used in *The Tale of Genji* are distinctly replicated in *Okane Ga Na* and other yaoi works, revealing how feminized sexuality is dominated by men.

Yaoi is extraordinarily unrealistic. No reader truly believes that sexual violence is the key to a successful relationship. One can make this assumption because yaoi as a genre is created by female artists and read by female consumers. Yaoi is a 'safe' alternative for women to turn to when they no longer want to read erotic work degrading female characters. Sexual females are

never present in yaoi, instead the genre shows masculine bodies controlling feminized ones.

Yaoi allows female readers to imagine themselves as the seme and therefore able to take part in the patriarchal power dynamics by controlling the uke's feminized pleasure. At the same time, the uke is so feminized that it is easy for women to envision themselves as the controlled. The genre reflects its readers' desires that have been conformed to rigid gender roles and stereotypes, while allowing a sense of escapism found in sexually explicit manga (Frennea 5).

The same kind of reflection can be seen in Edo period erotic ukiyo-e. In his essay, "The Gender of Wakashu and the Grammar of Desire," Joshua S. Mostow explores the erotic 'picture book' *Wakashu-asobi kyara no makura* which depicts both hetero and homosexual desires. Mostow focuses on the wakashu, a group of young beautiful males considered to be a third gender separate from adult men. The wakashu are not exclusively defined by their age, though normally found between the ages eleven and twenty-two (Mostow 53), but also by an undying loyalty to their male partners. Men who sexually engage with wakashu expect devotion, but the former may couple with several different partners at different times or during a ménage à trois. The *Wakashu-asobi kyara no makura* illustrates men and their various affairs with wakashu, prostitutes, and wives, however according to Mostow "this text is not designed to offer what its readers took for granted but rather purveys fantasies" (Mostow 61). The element of fantasy present in the erotic prints is shared with its modern day equivalent, yaoi. Acts between wakashu and men are usually consensual, but all control is given to the latter. Comparably, when yaoi mangas do depict consensual relationships the seme is still in the dominant position dictating when, where, and how sexual intercourse will occur. During a ménage à trois "*wakashu* and woman can sexually join, as long as it is under the direction and control of a man ... the man

insists on having them [his wives] watch [while he has intercourse with a wakashu] - he is 'guarding both gates well'" (Mostow 61-62). At no point are wives able to indulge in their own pleasure without the permission of a husband. When wives do indulge, they are visually degraded by being shown as aged, frustrated, and at times disfigured (Mostow 65). On the other hand, wakashu only have sexual relations with men as the penetrated, out of feelings of duty or affection, not because the situation is arousing. In almost all of the images in *Wakashu-asobi kyara no makura* the wakashu's penis is never visible, while the scene of the penetration by the man is a vital part of the erotica. When the wakashu have relations with women the text implies that both sexes are aroused, however any such scenario is controlled by a dominating man. Neither the wakashu nor female characters have agency over their own pleasure, both depend on a third male party.

Dependence on a male figure is seen in both *The Tale of Genji* and yaoi comics. Murasaki depends solely on Genji while the uke is in the same position with the seme. The historical context of sexual dominance either through rape, as in *The Tale of Genji*, or the control of pleasure, as in the *Wakashu-asobi kyara no makura*, proves why patriarchal, unhealthy relationships are so common in yaoi comics. However, a similar situation has arisen in the West. Originally begun in the 1970s, slash fanfiction was created by female fans centering around stories where canonically non-romantic male characters were involved in sexual relationships. At the same time in Japan, doujinshi, a genre of manga created by amateur artists mainly featuring characters from another manga or anime begin to gain popularity (Wood 405-406). Although slash fiction is not centered around sexual dominance in the same way yaoi is, the two share notable similarities.

In May 2010, an unknown fan created a category of fanfiction called Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics, a kink trope which played heavily on the same kind of patriarchal rape scenes that yaoi did; however, this trope was created without any direct influence from yaoi or Japanese erotica, but by fans of the American TV show *Supernatural*. Alpha/Beta/Omega fanfiction is defined as a trope “wherein some or all people have defined biological roles [alpha/beta/omega] based on a hierarchical system” (Fanlore). Alpha/Beta/Omega fanfiction became a category filled with stories based on plot lines where alphas would dominate and impregnate helpless omegas who after having ‘heats’, biological sexual urges, would become submissive and emit pheromones to make both parties aroused beyond reason. Alphas paired with omegas become dangerously jealous and possessive, only focusing on ‘mating’ with their partner. In this fantasy world, omega’s are constantly subject to sexual violence when their ‘heats’ come at unexpected times and can not be controlled. The ‘heats’ are always used as the excuse for the rape and yet in most works “Omegas are generally lowest on hierarchy (although in some fanworks Omegas are rare and prized)” (Fanlore).

Although it is not clear when, sometime between 2010 and 2015 yaoi manga artists started creating work in a category called the Omegaverse which was just another name for Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics. The Omegaverse fit in perfectly with the already consistent rape trope. In the last three years, dozens of yaoi have been published in which omega uke’s are graphically assaulted by alpha seme’s. The blaming of biological factors only heightens the power dynamic by making clear the rapist had no choice in his actions, that it was a bodily need.

Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics prove that the use of rape to control female desire is not only a Japanese attitude. In fact, over the last few years with the growth in popularity of both

yaoi and Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics it has become clear that the rape trope in relation to male characters in works of fiction is an international phenomenon in which female writers and readers dominate. Since the 1970s both slash fiction, the genre in which started Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamics, and yaoi have grown in popularity. At the same time women were becoming more and more prominent in the growing workforce. No longer is the picture perfect housewife the main goal of young women. Yet patriarchal sentiments are still apart of popular media. For example, in Japan childhood cartoons achieving international success like *Naruto*, which has “sold tens of millions of books around the world” (Solomon), may feature female characters but they only hold roles as mothers, healers, or love interests who are devoted to the main male character. Shoji manga, a genre which targets female teenagers, normally has stories revolving around heterosexual romances wherein winning a boyfriend is the most important part of a girl’s life. Yaoi uses the same kind of patriarchal dynamics found in shoji but replaces girls with feminized boys awhile acting as a erotica. Yaoi is the result of the changing conditions of women colliding with historical emphasis that has been placed on dominating female sexuality.

Yaoi will forever be tied to the rape trope. It has strong historical origins, as seen in the *Tale of Genji* and the *Wakashu-asobi kyara no makura*, and is adapting to new but still patriarchal categories like the Omegaverse. It seems likely that yaoi will only grow in popularity as more and more Western readers use the internet to find and translate the comics. In the last few years, Korean and Chinese artists have started to create yaoi comics as well, but like the Omegaverse, rape plays a central part of creating a relationship between characters. Before all other parts of plot or tropes, yaoi is used as a means of escape for women. And it must remain as such—a fantasy providing a source of comfort while never truly existing in our world.

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